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THE PASSIONATE STORY OF ONE MAN'S TWISTED OBSESSION FOR RED-HEADED SINNERS

A BIG NOVEL OF TORMENTED PEOPLE

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

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He had Killed Ann Lynch . . .

He could remember exactly how he had done it.

The blonde knocked his hand away and struggled off his lap.

"What's the matter with you, anyway? You crazy or something?" She backed cautiously away from him, her eyes wide with fright.

The scene in Ann's hotel suite was vivid now, racing through his brain like an accelerated movie. He was walking toward her. He was bending over her. He had her throat in his hands. She was fighting him. But he was choking her, and he would show no mercy. She had to be punished. He ground his thumbs deep into her windpipe. . . .

And suddenly the memory blurred and became another night and another girl. . . .

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RED-HEADED SINNERS

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Prologue

THE SHARP crack of his open hand against the girl's face was loud in the small room. He leaned over her, breathing heavily, feeling the sting of sweat in the furrow her teeth had cut in his palm.

The girl had red hair and tilted green eyes. Insolent, defiant eyes. And the blood that bubbled on her lips accentuated the ripe fullness of a mouth that was somehow hard. Her body on the chair was straight and small and rigid. Only her eyes and lips moved.

She said, "Hit me again, copper."

He hit her, harder this time, watching her head snap back, staring down at the red hair that seemed like a crimson mist swirling up around him. A blood red fog that blinded him and twisted his belly and seeped into his brain.

He watched the big white claws going out for the girl's throat. Those claws were his own hands, he knew, but it was as if they were detached from his body . . . white blobs moving slowly down into the red mist. His fingers tightened around the soft, damp warmth of her neck.

He watched the green eyes go round with sudden terror, then her hard mouth open in a silent scream.

A door opened behind him. He heard people yelling at him. A man and a woman. Heavy feet pounded across the floor toward him. Powerful hands caught at his shoulders and jerked him back from the girl. He felt his right arm twisted behind him and shoved upward in a hammerlock.

The woman moved in front of him, immense in her gray matron's uniform. In the lumpy suet of her face her eyes were flat and hard.

"Jeff!" she rasped. "You crazy?"

The hammerlock made Jeff Stoner's shoulder feel as if his arm were laced to it with white-hot wire. He moved slightly, and the man behind him shoved his arm up another two inches.

"Ease up," Jeff said. "I'm all right now. Ease up."

"Ease up, hell!" the man said. "You were trying to kill that girl!"

Jeff shook his head, but the red fog was still there.

"No," he mumbled. "No, I . . ."

"You bastard!" the man said. "You crazy, sadistic bastard!"

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The room was beginning to fill with people now, cops and detectives, the other night matron, the porter, the new reporter from the *King City Sentinel.* Eyes shuttled between Jeff's towering bulk and the small form of the girl on the chair, the girl with the bloody froth on her mouth. The eyes grew cold and remote.

For a long moment no one spoke.

Then the girl on the chair put out the tip of a small pink tongue and licked the blood from her lips. She smiled up at Jeff Stoner.

"Hit me again, copper," she said softly.

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Chapter One

THE THUNDERSTORM that had threatened the city all afternoon broke just as the police trial board got around to telling Jeff Stoner that he was through as a cop. Through, disgraced, and dismissed. The board had taken less than five minutes to reach that conclusion, after calling up Jeff's hearing in the record time of only two days.

Jeff listened to the roll of thunder across the city, vaguely aware of the Chief's voice as he told Jeff what he and the rest of the Department thought of a detective who would manhandle a female prisoner. The Chief's blast was mainly for the benefit of the press, Jeff knew, but there could be no mistaking the sardonic tone of the Old Man's voice, nor the open contempt in his faded eyes.

Jeff listened because he had to listen, and when the Chief had finished he walked back to the supply room and got a receipt for his .38 and holster, his handcuffs and badge. He signed a form stating that he was in possession of no other police property and that he had no claim, financial or otherwise, against the Department.

And that, he thought bitterly, was all there was to it. Just like that. Twelve years of being a good cop . . . down the sewer because of some nightmarish impulse he couldn't understand, and hadn't been able to control.

It had all been in the day's work—just another hood's girl to be asked a few trick questions. Routine. But something had happened. They'd pulled the girl in because they thought she knew where Piggy Ferris was holing up. Nothing more than that. Nothing to get rough about. Certainly nothing to make a man beat her up, try to kill her.

He walked slowly down the long corridor to the street door, acutely conscious of the accusative stares that followed him. He was bone-weary from two days and nights of no sleep. *Why?* he asked himself for the thousandth time. Why had he done such a thing? How could he have come that close to murder—*for no reason?* The matron had left the room for a moment, he remembered, and the girl's gypsy blouse had slipped down over one shoulder. He'd been questioning the girl and wishing he hadn't had that extra Martini before dinner—and it had happened. Without

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warning. Some foul abscess had burst in his brain, some crazy compulsion had driven him.

But *what?* What had happened to him? In the course of twelve years he had questioned hundreds of suspects—men *and* women—and never before had he so much as lain a finger on any one of them.

He reached the foyer. For a moment he stood staring out at the gray curtain of rain, and then he turned up the collar of his jacket and pushed through the revolving door.

He walked slowly, not caring about the rain. Marcia would be waiting by her telephone, he knew. He could picture her, auburn-haired and beautiful, sitting there in her tiny apartment glancing at the phone every few minutes, waiting for his call. Waiting to hear the worst.

And that was the most painful thing about this whole damn mess: the effect it would have on Marcia. At first she hadn't even been able to believe it.

He came abreast of Bailey's Bar. A drink might help. A big drink. He could have a fast double shot and then use the phone booth in the rear to call Marcia. He opened the screen door and stepped inside.

Except for Ed Bailey behind the bar and a zoot-suited punk trying to stand quarters on edge in a back booth, Jeff had the place to himself. He climbed onto a stool and fumbled for a cigarette. But his fingers were wet and the cigarette came apart. He dried his hands with his handkerchief and tried it again.

Ed Bailey moved up the bar toward him. "Same thing, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded. "Same thing—only make it a double."

Ed poured the drink. "Sort of wet out."

"Sort of," Jeff said. "Have one with me, Ed?"

"Not this time," Ed said. He mopped at the mahogany with his bar rag. "And Jeff—do me a favor, will you? Make that one the last."

Jeff stopped the glass half way to his lips. "What's chewing you? Why should this be the last one?"

Ed shifted his weight uneasily, not looking at Jeff. From the direction of the back booth came the tiny sound of coins falling. The zoot-suiter swore bitterly.

"Why *should* this be the last one?" Jeff said again.

Ed wet his lips. "You know how many of the boys hang out here when they're off duty."

"What about it?"

"Some of them might come in here any minute."

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"So?"

"So you're trouble, Jeff," Ed said in a tired voice. "And trouble's the number one thing I don't want."

Jeff set his glass down, very carefully. "Spell it out for me, Ed," he said.

"No offense," Ed said. "That drink's on the house. For old times' sake. I . . ."

"Let's have it," Jeff said tightly.

Ed shrugged. "All right, son. It's just that a lot of the boys are plenty sore at you. They figure you gave the Department a hell of a black eye. What with all the stink the *Sentinel* is raising over police corruption and brutality to prisoners, and all, they think you picked a mighty bad time to rough up that gal."

Jeff twisted the glass around in his fingers. A little of the whiskey sloshed out onto the bartop.

"Who's doing most of the talking?" he asked. "Gil Phelps?"

But he didn't have to ask. He knew it would be Gil, the only man he had ever really managed to hate. They'd been rivals—and enemies—ever since he could remember. As kids, and schoolmates, as National Guardsmen and fellow cops. And, more recently, even more bitterly, as rivals for Marcia Webster.

Gil had shown his resentment and jealousy in a thousand petty ways. Planting lies about Jeff. Undermining him with the police brass. Nothing that Jeff ever could prove. He knew his back bristled with Gil Phelps' knives, and there was nothing he could do but endure it.

Ed Bailey spread his hands. "Not just him, Jeff. Hell, it's all of them. Nobody likes to see a pretty girl take a bust in the mouth." He mopped at the spilled whiskey. "And from what I hear, it was even worse than that."

Jeff lifted his glass again. He drained the whiskey, chased it with a deep drag on his cigarette, and waited for the liquor to take hold. There was nothing to say to Ed. Not a thing.

Ed glanced anxiously toward the street door.

"Give me a break, Jeff," he said.

Jeff stood up. "Just as soon as I make a phone call."

"There's a booth next door in the drug store."

"To hell with you," Jeff told him. "I'll use yours.

He strode back to the booth and dialed Marcia's number. She answered it on the second ring.

He made it fast; it was just a matter of confirming something they had both known to be inevitable. ". . . . and I'll be over in a few minutes," he finished, and hung up. The sound of the

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tears in Marcia's voice had brought the pain throbbing through him again. The pain, and the deep shame—and the same gnawing, torturing, answerless question: *why?*

He walked toward the street door with a tall man's long stride, and he wouldn't have seen the two men in the front booth at all if he hadn't noticed the strange, worried look in Ed Bailey's eyes and followed his gaze toward them.

Lieutenant Gil Phelps and, across the booth from him, Harry Sybert of the *King City Sentinel.* It had been Phelps who had applied the hammerlock to Jeff's arm when Jeff had gone berserk in the red fog, and it had been Sybert's gift of invective that had branded Jeff in the eyes of the city as a monster.

"Keep going," Jeff heard Ed Bailey mutter from behind the bar. "Keep going, and don't come back."

Gil Phelps was lounging back against the booth cushions, his huge, wedge-shaped body dwarfing the thin little man across from him. He had close cropped blond hair and heavy, even features. The tight-lipped smile on his handsome face was the same one he had worn when he congratulated Jeff on Jeff's promotion to Lieutenant—eighteen months before Gil himself had been promoted. It was the same smile Jeff had seen there the night that Gil had stood and listened to Marcia tell him she was going to marry Jeff.

The little reporter's eyes were bright and cold and eager.

"I've just called in my story on what happened, Stoner," he said. His nose was thin and had been broken, and his receding chin was just a small bulge half way between his wide mouth and his throat. "But there's still one thing that intrigues me." He glanced at Gil Phelps and smiled. Phelps drummed the tips of thick, spatulate fingers on the table, his face expressionless, not smiling at all.

Sybert looked up at Jeff again, wetting his lips, enjoying this.

"I'd hate to keep you in the dark about anything, Harry," Jeff said. "What's worrying you this time?"

"The same thing that's worrying a lot of people, Stoner. Why'd you slug that girl? I mean, *she* wasn't a murder suspect, or anything like that. All you had on her was that she was Piggy Ferris' girl, and you wanted Piggy because you had him tagged for heisting forty thousand bucks' worth of ice." He laughed scornfully. "Hell, you didn't have *anything* on her. They let her go twenty minutes after you tried to kill her."

Jeff let his breath out slowly. "I didn't try to kill her. I—"

"The hell you didn't! I got there a couple seconds after Gil here pulled you off her. Don't tell *me* you didn't try to kill her." He wet his lips again. "The big question is why."

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Jeff bent down and spread his hands out flat on the table, his face inches from Sybert's. The cumulative effect of the last two days was getting to him. "Keep talking, Harry," he said softly. "Just keep making with the mouth."

The thin reporter swallowed hard. For an instant, fear crawled in his eyes; and then, suddenly, the fear was gone and his eyes were narrow. "I'm going to pull your cork, Stoner! A guy just don't go crazy like that *for nothing*. There was some good reason for what you did. Some *damn* good reason. And I'm going to look under every rock in your backyard until I find out what it is!" His face was studded with sweat; the collar of his pale blue shirt was black with it. "There's something between you and that girl and Piggy, something the Department doesn't know about." He half rose from the booth. "But they're *going* to know about it. Everybody is going to know. And I'm the guy who's going to tell them!"

Gil Phelps cleared his throat. "Take it easy, Harry," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Stoner has had a hard day."

Jeff looked at the glistening, vicious face of the reporter, and, abruptly, what little strength had remained in him washed out of his body completely. He felt as if someone had worked him over with a cue butt and then jammed it down his throat.

"You're wrong, Sybert," he said. "I don't know why I . . . It just happened, that's all."

The reporter shook his head slowly. "Like hell. Those things don't 'just happen,' Stoner."

"It did this time," Jeff said. He turned toward Gil Phelps. "You got anything to add to this, Gil?"

Phelps smiled his strange, enigmatic smile. "I can't think of anything at the moment, Jeff. Maybe later, but not just yet." He raised his voice. "Ed! Bring us a couple beers."

Jeff looked down at his hands. They were trembling. Another ten seconds of this and a bad situation would become even worse. He fought back the helpless anger that surged inside of him. It cost him every ounce of will power he possessed, but he managed somehow to turn away from the booth and walk to the door.

And as the screen slammed shut behind him, he heard the high-pitched, almost effeminate laughter of the chinless little reporter. A laugh to prickle a man's skin—like the scrape of chalk on a blackboard. An unnatural, demonic laugh that hit a man like a fist in the belly.

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Chapter Two

WHEN MARCIA WEBSTER had put the phone back in its cradle after Jeff's call from Bailey's Bar, she sat for several moments without moving, listening to the drone of the shower in her bathroom blending with the quieter, whispering drone of the rain against the windows.

She had been on her way to the shower when Jeff called. She wore nothing but ballet slippers and the green ribbon with which she had tied up her dark, shoulder-length hair, and the rough nap of the Morris chair in which she sat chafed mildly, though not unpleasantly against the creamy softness of her skin.

She was an incredibly beautiful girl, high-breasted and long-legged. Now she crossed one tapering leg over the other, folded her arms and leaned forward on her bare thighs. Her smoke-gray eyes grew cloudy with thought.

There were, she reflected, always two sides to every coin. She remembered the relief and elation she had felt when Jeff had first told her he was suspended. She'd hated his work, because of the danger and death that followed him every moment of his life, but she had understood his deep love for his job, and she had kept her hatred of it and her fear for him a secret. Still, she had never ceased to hope that, somehow, he would turn to something else. *Anything* else. Sales work, maybe. Jeff would make a good salesman. But it wouldn't really matter *what* he did, so long as there wasn't that continual anxiety over his safety.

Well, he was no longer a cop. That part of her dream had come true. But there was the other side of the coin, the ugly, tarnished side. She now had to live with the sickening knowledge that Jeff had beaten a young girl, had even tried to kill her. She remembered how, at first, she had been wholly unable to believe that Jeff was capable of the viciousness that the editorial in the *Sentinel* attributed to him.

But that had been before she had gone back in her memory to two occasions on which Jeff had been so unlike himself that he had frightened her.

That time at the beach, for one. They'd had a few bottles of beer at the pavilion, and then decided, suddenly, to go swimming.

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They'd rented suits and swum out to the raft and back—and then, just before they'd reached the beach, she'd looked over at Jeff and seen the terrible look on his face. An expression like nothing she had ever seen there before. She had found herself swimming as rapidly as she could, and when she reached the beach she ran to the bathhouse without once looking back.

Later, when she finally came out in her street clothes, Jeff was waiting for her, puzzled and concerned about her. She had alibied by telling him she had become ill in the water. And she had told herself that it was merely her imagination, and she'd have to curb it.

But the second time had been quite different. It had happened on a sultry day when Jeff had a few hours off and dropped by her apartment unexpectedly. They had been drinking Gin Bucks and were watching an old Western movie on TV. She remembered vividly how she had turned from the screen to say something to Jeff. The look was there again. His face, beneath his tan, was pale, and his dark eyes were probing hard into hers, glittering and cold and malevolent. His big body was almost rigid and his hand shook so violently that he spilled most of his drink.

She'd left the room hurriedly. A moment later, the phone rang. She listened while Jeff answered it, and then called to her that the call had been for him and that he had to go back to work.

Marcia got up from her chair and walked to the window, feeling a strange restlessness, a sense of unease. She pulled the drape across her nakedness and stood looking down into the street below. The rain was lessening a little now, she noticed, but it had done nothing toward breaking the almost unbearable summer heat, nothing at all. It had been a miserable day. And taking the day off from work had been a mistake; it had given her too much time to think.

Suddenly she remembered that Jeff said he would be over in a few minutes. She'd have to hurry. She left the window and crossed to the bathroom.

She stepped into the shower and turned on the water. The cold needlepoint spray made her gasp, but after a moment its stinging force began to work some of the tenseness out of her body.

Things never turn out to be exactly what you hope they'll be, she thought. Jeff's free now. I don't have to worry about him any more. We can get married, like we've planned. I can have children, without wondering how long it'll be before their father gets killed.

She turned the shower off and began to dry herself with a huge pink towel. She was filled with a strange hollowness; tiny doubts

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began to gnaw at the back edge of her mind, and she felt the first stirrings of something foreboding, some vague formless fear of the future.

She tried to force her thoughts into another pattern, to forget the girl Jeff had treated so brutally—had started to strangle. She could picture the scene in her mind in all its nightmarish hideousness.

It's like a wedge, she thought. A horrible, filthy little wedge that goes in deeper every time you think about it.

There was a smarting at the inner corners of her wide-set gray eyes. She rubbed the towel furiously against flesh that was already glowing.

I'll be damned if I cry, she thought. I'll just be damned if I will!

Chapter Three

TO JEFF STONER, the two blocks between Bailey's Bar and the parking lot where he had left his Plymouth seemed more like two miles. He felt the double shot spreading all the way through him. He wondered how many doubles a man in his condition could take and still remain upright. Not many, certainly. And the hell of it was that he *needed* liquor. More than he had ever needed it.

The parking lot attendant braked Jeff's car, climbed out and handed him the keys.

"Six bits," he said.

Jeff looked at him in surprise. The attendant glanced up at the dark sky and hummed impatiently, looking somehow ludicrous in his out-sized rubber slicker.

"I'll sign a chit, Johnny," Jeff said. "Like always."

Johnny shook his head. "No more chits. We just got the big word from the Department."

Jeff reached for his wallet. His flash-point must be pretty low this evening, he decided. Or maybe it was the whiskey. Anyhow, he should have anticipated this. He gave Johnny a dollar, waved away the change.

"They don't let any grass grow, do they?" he said.

Johnny shrugged. "It's no skin off mine, friend. Me, I just work here." He walked off toward the ticket shed.

Jeff slid behind the wheel, slammed the door hard and nosed the Plymouth out into the street. The incident, for some ridiculous rea-

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son, had irked him beyond its true importance, or *lack* of it. A cop lost his badge; ergo, he lost the things that went with it. Like parking privileges. Very simple. No cause to feel outraged.

But he noticed that he was gripping the wheel so tightly that the knuckles of his big hands showed white.

He swore softly. He'd *have* to have another drink before he met Marcia; he was coming apart at the seams. Three blocks further on he curbed the Plymouth in front of a package store.

The flashlight in his face hurt his eyes, blinded him. He heard a man's voice say, "Jeff! Come out of it, man!" He felt the pressure of strong fingers on his shoulder as the man shook him. He knocked the hand away.

"Come out of it," the man said again.

"Turn that light off," Jeff said. His whole body ached. There was a thick, nasty taste in his mouth and the back of his head felt as if he'd been sapped.

The flashlight went out. "You okay?" the man asked.

Jeff pushed himself up straight in the seat. His hand struck the bottle beside him and knocked it off onto the floorboard. He must have gone out like a light! How long had he been this way?

"Yeah, I'm all right," he said thickly. He recognized the other man's voice now. A brother cop. "Thanks, Mack."

"You think you can drive?" Mack said.

"Sure. Sure I can drive."

"You were smart to pull off the road," Mack said. He shut the door. "Well, take it easy."

"Sure," Jeff said. He watched Mack walk toward his motorcycle. Must be in Logan Park, he thought. Yes, that's it. Too many trees to be anything else. He glanced at his wristwatch. The face was a little blurry, but he could make it out. Eight o'clock.

What had happened to the three hours? He tried, painfully, to think back over his actions. He'd stopped at the liquor store, he remembered. He'd had a couple of healthy ones in the car . . . maybe more than a couple. He bent and lifted the fifth of whiskey. Almost half gone. It didn't seem possible.

He stared at the bottle for a moment. One more couldn't hurt. He had to pull himself together, didn't he? He unscrewed the cap and tilted the bottle and shuddered as the whiskey scalded down his throat.

There! That was more like it!

He put the bottle down and lighted a cigarette. Nothing like a good jolt of whiskey to pull a man together. Absolutely nothing.

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And it made a man think more clearly, too. Everything was clear now. Clear as glass. *No!* Clear as a *bell;* that was it—*clear as a bell.*

He started the motor and flicked on the headlights. Better have another jolt. Just to make sure. He tilted the bottle up longer this time, and then he released the hand brake and backed the car out of the bushes. He was in Logan Park, all right. He recognized every tree and bush and rock in it. Too bad a man couldn't be like this all the time, with his thoughts so clear and sharp and fast. *Clear as a bell!*

He knew what he was going to do. Hell, he'd known all along. He was going to find that red haired girl that had caused him so much grief. She didn't realize it, but she was going to help him square himself with the Department. With the Department and with Marcia and with King City. The redhead—what was her name?—knew damned well where Piggy Ferris was holing up. She knew, and she knew *he* knew she knew. Get it out of her. No rough stuff this time, no crazy stuff. Just get it out of her. And then get Piggy. When he got Piggy, he'd be in clover. He'd be redeemed. Piggy and his forty grand worth of heisted ice.

The Old Man would *have* to take him back if he walked in with Piggy and the ice. The Old Man would know a good cop would have to get Piggy. He'd know a good cop *would* get Piggy. Piggy and his damn ice!

He drove slowly, beautifully. Best job of driving I ever did, he thought proudly. He wondered if he should have another drink. No. Wait until he got on a darker street. Citizens didn't understand that cops liked to take a drink, like everybody else. Didn't look good. The Old Man wouldn't like it. Marcia wouldn't like it. But she was going to be mighty proud of him pretty soon. Damn right!

Connie Knight! That was the redhead's name! He knew he'd think of it. Just a matter of time. And she lived at the Barclay Court Apartments! He grinned broadly, patting the bottle on the seat beside him. *Clear as a bell!* He gave the Plymouth a little more gas.

There was no one in the corridor as he pressed the buzzer beside the door of Connie Knights eighth floor apartment, and neither had there been anyone in the lobby below when he had walked along the row of mailboxes to find Connie's apartment number. He'd begun to sweat heavily in the tiny, self-service elevator. Not that it mattered. He'd been wet already, from the rain.

The door opened a couple of inches. Jeff rammed his foot be-

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tween it and the jam. "Police," he said. "Open up." He put his shoulder against the door and pushed into the room.

Connie Knight looked very much as if she were going to scream, Jeff decided.

He said, "Keep your mouth shut. This isn't what you think." He heeled the door shut behind him, glancing around the apartment to make sure she was alone. It was a small, one-room apartment with a wall bed. The doors to the bathroom and closet were open. She was alone, all right.

She was wearing a blue housecoat, filmy but opaque, belted tightly at her small waist, and high-heeled shoes.

"What the hell do you want?" she said.

"A couple of answers," Jeff told her.

"Not from me, Buster. You ain't a cop no more. I can read real good."

He wondered why she kept the apartment so damn hot. A guy could get sick in a place like this. "That's why I'm here," he said.

Something flickered in her tilted green eyes.

"You touch me again, copper," she said, "and I'll pull a scream like you never heard before. Maybe I'll do it anyway, just for laughs."

Jeff reached in his pocket for cigarettes. His pack was empty. He crossed to the cocktail table in front of the studio couch and took one from a plastic box. Have to play this cool, he thought.

"They gave me a bum deal," he said. "It doesn't set so well."

She had turned as he crossed the room; her eyes had never left him. "So?"

He shrugged. "Some cops might like to get back at them." This heat, he thought. This damn, muggy heat. Enough to cook a man's brain. "A busted cop might get pretty mad," he said slowly. "He might even hook up with Piggy Ferris." He smiled at her. "But first, he'd have to know how to take the heat off Piggy."

Connie Knight was standing between him and the floor lamp now, her lush body silhouetted against it. Her hard mouth twisted scornfully. "I told you before. I don't know where Piggy is. And even if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't tell no lousy copper. You might be busted, but you're still a copper. I hate your guts!"

Jeff's throat felt dry and hot. He tried to grin again. This was going all wrong. If she'd only shut up a minute, so he could think. Why did she keep this place so damn hot?

"I could use a drink," he said, smiling.

"Listen," she said tightly. "You're drunk as hell already. I don't

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know what your pitch is, but I'm telling you, you couldn't con *anybody!*" She brushed past him and sat down on the studio couch. She pulled the skirt of the housecoat across her thighs and glared up at him. "Go on. Get the hell out of here."

Jeff stared down at her, at the red hair. He wet his lips.

The red hair. . . .

The floor beneath Jeff's feet seemed to tilt a little. She was looking up at him insolently, defiantly—the way she had in the back room at Headquarters. He remembered the blood bubbling on her lips.

The housecoat fell away from her thighs again, and this time she didn't bother about it. He couldn't take his gaze from them.

"Get an eyeful, copper," she said tauntingly. "And *get out!*"

The naked thighs and the red hair. . . .

It was coming back again, the red mist, the horrible red mist that had soaked into his brain once before, that had brought the kill-fever surging up inside him.

"Leda," he said softly. "Leda."

Connie Knight tilted her head back and laughed, a bitter and mocking laugh. "Listen to *that!* Now he thinks I'm somebody named Leda!" She stopped laughing. There were tiny fires in her green eyes. "Damn you! Get out!"

The red mist. He'd been too slow last time. He could remember how slowly his hands had gone out for her throat. He'd have to be faster this time. Much faster. The crimson fog swirled up around him, smothering him.

"Leda," he said again. His hands streaked down for her throat. Very fast. Like snakes striking.

He felt the bone and cartilage crunching in his hands. He smiled down at her. The red fog grew more dense. Finally his wrist began to ache. He couldn't see her at all now. There was just the impenetrable crimson curtain in front of his eyes and the blood red mist seeping through his eyes and into his brain.

"Jeffrey!" his mother called, and he got up from the living room floor and brushed off his bare knees and trotted into the kitchen. He leaned back a little to look up at his mother, searching her face to see if this was going to be one of the good times or one of the bad times. He hoped she wouldn't scold him. He wanted her to be all laughing and smiling, the way she used to be. She was very beautiful with her hair fluffed out like that. None of the other boys' mothers was half so pretty.

"I'm going downtown, Jeffrey," his mother said. "If you get hungry before I get back, ask Leda to fix you something."

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"Can't I go with you?"

"No, dear. Not this time. Mother's only going to the dentist."

He said, "Oh," and was disappointed. This was one of the good times and he would have liked to be with her. He stood quietly in the kitchen, listening to his mother's heels going down the back stairs, and then he wandered back to the living room and stared down at the jigsaw puzzle he had been working on. But he'd lost interest. He wondered if Leda was up in her room. Leda was pretty, too. She was the prettiest maid they'd ever had. And not old, like most of them. He'd heard his mother say that Leda was eighteen, but she didn't seem like a grown-up to him.

He climbed the stairs and walked along the corridor without a sound. He turned the knob of Leda's door very carefully. He'd slip up on her and surprise her. He pushed the door open inch by inch.

He stared at Leda a long time, wondering why she didn't have any clothes on, wondering why she was hurting herself like that. It seemed funny that she'd be lying on her bed naked and reading a magazine and hurting herself at the same time.

And that funny expression on her face! She couldn't be hurting herself very bad, or she wouldn't look like that.

He giggled.

There was a flailing of white legs and arms as Leda jerked a corner of the bedspread across herself. "Jeff! Jeff, you little . . ."

He'd scared her good! He laughed out loud. But, after a moment, he noticed that Leda wasn't laughing, and so he stopped too. He'd only meant to play a trick on her.

She was looking at him strangely. She had green eyes just like a pussycat, he thought. And red hair. Some of the grown-up boys on the block called her "Rusty," and that always made her mad.

He said, "I didn't mean to scare you so bad, Leda. Honest."

She was still looking at him in that funny way.

"I didn't mean to," he said again. He liked Leda; he was sorry she was mad.

Leda said, "Close the door, Jeffrey," and now he could see that she wasn't mad, after all. She was almost smiling at him. He closed the door. He watched Leda throw the bedspread off her so that she was all naked again.

"Come here, Jeffrey," she said softly.

He went to the bed and stood beside it, ready to laugh if Leda laughed. She smelled good. She always smelled good.

"Has your mother left yet?" Leda said.

Jeff nodded. "She went to the dentist." Leda's built funny, he thought. She's pretty, but she's built funny.

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"Would you like to play a game with me, Jeff?" Leda said.

He nodded eagerly.

"And will you keep the game a secret? Even from your mother and father?"

"Sure!" he said. "What's the game?"

She told him.

He was a little surprised. It wasn't any game he had ever heard of. It didn't sound like it would be any fun. He couldn't understand why Leda would want to play a game like that. Grown-ups were silly.

Leda moved around on the bed. She was breathing very fast, he noticed.

"There," she said at last. Now, go ahead, Jeffrey."

He hesitated.

"Please, Jeffrey," Leda whispered.

He liked Leda. He'd play her silly game, even if it *wasn't* much fun.

Chapter Four

GEORGE BISHOP heard Trudy murmur something in her sleep and he glanced toward the studio couch where she lay, wondering if perhaps he shouldn't cover her with the sheet again. She really shouldn't sleep raw like that; posing in the nude all day and sleeping the same way at night wasn't too healthy for a seventeen-year-old girl. Or anybody else.

He put his can of beer down on the floor beside his chair, rubbed out his cigarette in a tray and crossed to the couch and covered her again.

He stood looking down at her, at the unbelievably long lashes and the thick dark curls on the pillow, and once again he felt the familiar mingling of awe and pity. Awe, because of her truly exceptional beauty . . . and pity because she was wasting it on a man like George Bishop. A man who made his living painting pornography. And then, as always happened in moments like these, he thought of what it would be like when Trudy discovered what she was doing to herself. Girls like Trudy didn't happen to men of forty very often. Not to prematurely gray artists of little talent and less money.

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It was going to be tough to do without her, plenty tough. It was going to hurt like hell.

He went back to his chair and sat down again, and after a moment he picked up his copy of the *Sentinel* and reread the front-page account of Jeff Stoner's dismissal from the Police Department. They'd certainly pulled out all the stops; they'd made Jeff sound considerably less than human.

He put the paper down and picked up his beer. It was strange that Jeff hadn't come by to see him, that he hadn't even telephoned. Maybe he was off somewhere licking his wounds with the help of a bottle.

He finished the beer and crossed the cluttered room to the kitchen. He opened a fresh can of beer and came back into the living room and paused a moment before his easel. Trudy was a blonde this time. She had been a blonde four consecutive paintings now; he'd have to give her black hair the next time. Or maybe just plain brown. That would be novel, for pornography. He might even paint her wearing a kerchief over her hair. Kerchief and bobby-sox and loafers and nothing else. His steady customers would go for that. He could do the original—make her look about fourteen with a little adolescent fat—and probably sell a dozen copies before he was through.

The room was filled with the smells of paint and alcohol and cigarettes and beer. He went to the window and opened it. The rain had stopped.

Behind him, Trudy said, "Are you hungry, George?"

He turned. She had propped herself up on one elbow and now she pushed the sheet down to her hips.

"No, baby," George said. "I made myself a sandwich a while ago. You'd better go back to sleep."

She swung slim legs over the side of the couch and slipped into her mules. "I can't," she said. "It's too hot." She flexed her arms and yawned, smiling at him with her eyes. "Is there any more beer?"

When George came back with the beer she was sitting on the side of the couch and smoking a cigarette.

"One of these days," George said, "I'm going to make you put on a dress. I've got a terrific yen to see what you'd look like in clothes."

"Not in this weather, darling." She sipped her beer, studying him along her eyes. George sat down beside her and stared at the mural he had painted on the far wall. Women, he thought. That's all I ever paint. Someday I'll paint a horse.

"You seem worried, George," Trudy said. "Is anything wrong?"

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"No," George said.

"Yes, there is, too." She laughed softly. "You're not worried about *me* again, are you darling. That statutory rape business never really happens, you know."

"Don't remind me of it," George said.

The banter went out of her voice; it became just a young girl's voice, and very serious.

"George . . . tell me what's wrong."

He rubbed the palms of his hands slowly across the front of his paint-smeared sweatshirt. "I was thinking about Jeff," he said. "The paper came while you were asleep. They threw him off the force."

"Isn't that what you expected them to do? Isn't that what *he* expected?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Well, then . . . ?"

He kept his eyes on the mural. "You never liked him, did you?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I've told you, darling. He's just too crude for baby."

"That's being a little snobbish, isn't it?"

She got up and walked to the radio-phonograph and began looking through the stack of loose records on the table beside it. "Maybe the word *isn't* crude." What's the difference? He's just not my type." She put a record on the turntable and lowered the playing arm. "Jeff Stoner's like a big dog on a leash. Or maybe he's more like a stick of dynamite with the fuse lighted. You always have the feeling that he's on the verge of tearing into you, or exploding, or something. You know what I mean?"

"No," George said. "And I don't think you do, either."

She shrugged one rounded shoulder and gestured toward the ceiling-high shelves of books that filled one entire wall of the room.

"All right," she said gently. "You're the brainy one. You've read all those books, and you've been around the world four or five times, and you've known thousands of people. You tell *me* what's wrong with him."

He let his breath out slowly. "I wish I knew," he said.

Trudy put another record on the changer and came back to the couch and sat down again. "You've been his friend long enough. You *should* know."

"He's had a tough time," George said. "All orphans do."

"I didn't know he was an orphan," Trudy said.

"Yeah. And having the world kick you in the face most of your

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life doesn't leave you as sweet and gentle as—what was the name of that school you went to?"

"Joslyn."

"Yes. Joslyn. Quite a difference, Trudy."

"My, but we're grim tonight," Trudy said. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right," George said. "You still feel like making sandwiches?"

She laughed and strode out into the kitchen, walking the way he had taught her to walk that first day she had moved in with him. He hadn't felt like giving her the details about Jeff—about the way his father had deserted the family, about his embezzlement of money from his employer. About Jeff's mother suiciding. . . . Such things would interest her, of course, but she would experience them simply as interesting, gossipy facts, and nothing more. There'd be no attempt on her part to see them as determining factors in the life of a man who had attacked a young girl, a prisoner.

"Beef or cheese?" she called from the kitchen.

"Beef," he said. You can root around in another man's life, he thought, and sometimes you can find the reasons for the things he does. The early experiences, the shocks, the things that happen in infancy and the first years of childhood. Things long forgotten; painful, horrible things, pushed far back into the memory so that a man doesn't have to look at them.

George got up and began to pace the room. How many countless times had he tried to discover the things that had made *him* what he was? Always drifting, always changing, always hunting for something without ever once knowing what it was—without ever once being sure he would know it even if he found it. He glanced at the spinet piano against the wall opposite the bookshelves. A thousand lessons—and yet he couldn't make a living playing a piano in a honkytonk. He'd tried, that summer in Paris, and he'd lasted exactly two nights. And the dozen other things he'd tried . . . brief flirtations . . . and then on to something else. The painting—and, before the painting, the sketching and sculpting and ceramics. Hundreds of sketches and sculptures and ceramics scattered from Paris to Rome to Greenwich Village.

He paused, feeling the accusative after-shame of self-pity. Negative thinking. Childlike thinking. Ridiculous. It was Jeff Stoner who had the *real* problem, the urgent problem. He was in a weird mood tonight; he didn't usually indulge himself like this.

The phone rang and George walked out to the alcove to answer it.

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Marcia Webster's voice said, "George, this is Marcia. I seem to have a man missing." She laughed, but the laugh was false. "I thought he might be over there with you."

George caught the overtones of concern in her voice. "No, Marcia," he told her. "I haven't seen Jeff since—for the last few days."

There was a long silence.

George cleared his throat. "Did he say he was coming over here?"

"No. But . . . Oh, George, I'm worried about him. He's taking this thing so hard, and all, and . . ." Her voice broke.

"Listen," George said. "You're doing a lot of fretting for nothing. It's only ten o'clock. Chances are he's in a bar somewhere. I know that's where *I'd* be, if *I* were he."

Another long silence. Then, "If you see him, or he telephones, will you ask him to call me?"

"Sure, Marcia. But you're worrying over nothing. I—"

But she had hung up.

Trudy came in from the kitchen, carrying a tray with the sandwiches and a bowl of olives. She sat down on the couch and balanced the tray on her bare thighs and patted the cushion beside her. "Sit down, darling. Who was that on the phone?"

"Marcia," George said. He sat down, but suddenly he was no longer hungry.

"Checking on Jeff?" Trudy asked.

"Yes."

Trudy bit into a sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. "I've had a thought," she said. "Would you like to know what it is?"

"More than anything in this world," George said absently. A man can't hurt just himself alone, he thought; he always hurts someone else too. He was very fond of Marcia, had always been fond of her. He was sorry for both of them.

"I was thinking that if something happened to Jeff, then you'd have a clear track," Trudy said. "You could take up with Marcia right where you left off."

George didn't bother to keep the pained expression off his face. "Let's don't go into *that* again," he said sourly. Women—*girls*, rather—weren't like this when *he* was seventeen. They didn't seem to have any girlhood these days. They were just knobby-kneed kids and then suddenly, with no girlhood at all, they were women. He could remember when seventeen-year-old girls *acted* like seventeen-year-olds.

Or maybe it was just that he was getting old. . . .

"Well," Trudy said in that quiet, careful voice he'd come to rec-

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ognize as the signal for an uncomfortable session, "you saw her first, didn't you, darling?"

"I *knew* her first," George said patiently. "I introduced her to Jeff. Please, Trudy, let's not . . ."

"Oh, but *let's!*" Trudy said. She speared an olive with a toothpick and sucked the pimento out of it and put the olive shell back on the tray. "You're still carrying a torch for that girl, George, and we both know it."

George sighed resignedly. "All right, baby," he said. "Talk a while. Talk as long as you like. And when you've finished with this nonsense, make some sort of sign to let me know. Then I'll start listening to you again."

Trudy ignored him. "I should have known," she said. "So *that's* what has been bothering you! You've been thinking that what Jeff Stoner did to that girl would turn Marcia against him and she'd give him the brush and then you could jump in with both feet."

"You have an extremely delicate way of expressing yourself," George said. "Comes from your long attendance at ivy-covered Joslyn, no doubt."

"No doubt," Trudy said. "And sleeping with you is educational too, I've discovered."

"Thank you," George said. There was only one thing to do when Trudy was like this: nothing.

She put the tray on the floor and twisted around so that she was peering straight into his eyes. "George," she said, "do you know you talk in your sleep?"

He held her gaze and wet his lips.

"You do," she said. "Almost every night. And, George—can you guess who has her little pink ear right next to your lips?"

"Damn it, Trudy," he said. "I wish you'd . . ."

"I don't hear complete *sentences*, mind you," Trudy said. "Just fragments. A word here, a word there. Here a word, there a word—and do you know what a lot of it's about, George?"

He started to rise, but she reached out and pushed him back down.

"It's about Marcia, that's who!"

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Chapter Five

JEFF STONER'S return to awareness was abrupt, and somehow terrifying. It was like awakening in the middle of a nightmare, a part of his mind still reacting to it, still imbued with its nameless dread and sense of helplessness.

He was leaning up against the wall in a doorway on Flower Street, he discovered, in the heart of the tenderloin district. I've done it again, he thought. I've had another blackout.

He felt a sudden clutch of nausea and turned quickly to the wall and was sick against it, while behind him the garishly lighted street surged with music and laughter from the open doors of the cheap bars and penny arcades.

When he turned toward the street again there were tears in his eyes and his throat felt as if it had been scalded. But he felt a little better.

He glanced across the street at the neon-bordered clock in a store window. Ten o'clock. It had been eight when he came to the other time, he recalled. Two hours.

He leaned against the side of the doorway, trying to remember at exactly what point he had left Connie Knight's apartment. He had a hazy recollection of asking for a drink, and being refused. And now he remembered. Connie had not only refused the drink but she had kicked him out. He remembered distinctly now; he could even remember the way her green eyes had glared at him. And he could remember trying to get back into the Plymouth, and how he hadn't been able to find his key and had got out and started walking. . . .

He went through his pockets again. The Plymouth would still be where he'd parked it before he went up to see Connie, he knew, but it wouldn't do him any good without the key. He searched his clothing again—and found it in his shirt pocket. Small wonder he'd missed it the first time.

He stepped out onto the sidewalk and turned to the right. Connie's apartment house was only a couple of blocks from here, but the big question was whether or not he could make it. He walked along, slowly, oblivious to the jostling crowds on the sidewalk.

It had stopped raining, he noted, and the hot, damp air was heavy with the greasy smell of overcooked frankfurters and hamburgers on

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the open grills along the sidewalk. For a moment he thought he was going to be sick again.

He wondered if he could keep a drink of whiskey inside him. Probably not . . . but it was worth the try. He stopped in a bar and had three of them—and by the time he reached the Plymouth the throbbing pain in his head had diminished to just a dull ache and his stomach had calmed.

Suddenly he remembered that he should have been at Marcia's apartment hours ago. He started the motor and edged out into the traffic. A few minutes more wouldn't matter—and he'd have to change his clothes anyway. He could call her from his own place and try to explain things. That was going to be one sweet job, he reflected. How could you explain to someone like Marcia that certain people *did* black out, that they *did* do things while they were that way which they couldn't remember later?

That visit to Connie Knight had been a mistake, he realized. The Department would know all about it by now, of course. She wouldn't miss an opportunity like this to hit back at him. The Chief could give him a bad time over it, if he wanted to. And if Connie had thought to call anyone at the *Sentinel*—that damn Harry Sybert, for instance—things could get very, very rough.

Still, Connie would have to prove that he'd said the things he had. And, when you came right down to it, she would have one hell of a time even proving that he was there at all. Not that the *Sentinel* would need any proof—all they needed was a peg to hang a story on. He might be able to worm out of it so far as the Department was concerned, but the *Sentinel* would never stop until it had his pelt tacked on the city room wall.

He called Marcia's number twice during the short time he was in his apartment changing to fresh clothes, and the line was busy both times. He always had trouble that way. Marcia was on a party line with three large families, all with teen-age daughters. After four o'clock, it was usually easier and faster just to get in the Plymouth and go over there.

He tried once more just before he left the apartment. Still busy.

As he passed the switchboard on his way to the street he paused a moment and told the operator to switch any calls for him to Marcia's number.

But as he got into the Plymouth again he thought of another angle, another person who might lead him to Piggy Ferris, and suddenly the new approach obsessed him completely. If anyone knew where Piggy was—especially now that he was in the blue chips again—it was his ex-mistress, Ann Lynch. Piggy had had a lot of

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women in his time, but there had been only one who had really gotten to him. And that one woman was Ann. Find *her* and he might find Piggy. Even if he didn't grab Piggy outright, there was an odds-on chance that he could get a line on him.

He tried to remember where it was that George Bishop had said he'd seen her. George had just come back from one of his trips and had mentioned seeing her, but that was all he could remember. Damn! Well, he could call George from Marcia's place and ask him.

Better yet, he could stop by George's on the way. It would take only a couple of minutes, and he was so late now that Marcia couldn't possibly become any more angry, no matter how hard she tried. He turned at the next intersection and drove toward George's apartment house.

Chapter Six

AS JEFF approached the door of George Bishop's apartment, he could hear the fast pound of Dixieland. Gutty tailgate trombone sounded out above the other instruments and the metallic splash of drumsticks hit against a crash cymbal. Jeff tossed his cigarette into a sand urn and knocked on the door.

When George opened the door his face was flushed and his forehead was sheened with sweat. He smiled and opened the door wide.

"Well," he said. "It's about time!"

Over George's shoulder Jeff could see Trudy on the couch, the sheet up to her chin, glaring at him. He grinned at her and she grimaced and stared up at the ceiling.

"Hello, George," Jeff said. "I've only got a minute." He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Guess I should have called first."

"Forget it," George said. "Well, if you've got a minute, you've got time for a drink. Okay?"

"A sissy one," Jeff said. "I've had too much already."

"I never made one like that," George smiled. "You'd better come out in the kitchen and supervise me."

As Jeff followed George across the room he glanced at Trudy again, wondering, as he always did, why it was that she resented him. He'd gone out of his way to be nice to her, because he knew George was fond of her, but it had bought him nothing.

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He let the kitchen door swing shut behind him and watched George struggling with the ice tray in the refrigerator.

"George," he said, "I've got a couple things I want to talk over with you . . ."

"Shoot," George said. "You want one slug or two?"

"One. This is sort of private, George."

"Sure," George said. "Don't worry about Trudy. She can't hear you."

Jeff took the drink George handed him. "Just the same," he said, "I think we'd better sit on the fire stairs."

George shrugged. "Why not?" He unlocked the door at the far end of the kitchen and opened it and stepped outside. Jeff followed him and sat down beside him on the top step.

"You're wrong about Trudy," George said. "She's a good kid."

"She's also a *young* kid," Jeff told him. "And she's got too good a memory."

George swirled his drink around in the glass and said nothing.

"You heard the news, I guess," Jeff said. "I mean, about my getting canned."

George nodded. "Best thing that ever happened. Now you can . . ."

"No," Jeff said. "I *liked* being a cop, George. It's the only job I ever liked, and it's the only job I ever wanted."

"Well," George said, "there are other police departments. Other cities. If you've got to be a cop, then you will be a cop. Right?"

"Sure, George. But I'm going to be a cop right here in King City." He took a quick swallow of his drink. "But first I have to get reinstated. About the only way that could happen is for me to bring in Piggy Ferris."

"That's crazy, Jeff," George said. "Forget it."

"It's the only way. I've made one bad start at it already."

"Bad?"

"I paid a call on that girl. I—I went over to see Connie Knight."

George glanced at him sharply. "Tonight?"

"Yes. A few hours ago. I thought maybe I could find out something about Piggy."

"That was a damn fool thing to do," George said softly. "What got into you?"

"Liquor," Jeff said. "I was drunk."

"You damn well must have been. What'd you find out?"

"Nothing. She knew I'd been busted off the force and she kicked me out of the apartment."

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George shook his head. "And now I suppose you're thinking about what'll happen when the Department finds out about it."

"Not so much the Department," Jeff said. "It's the *Sentinel.* And especially a new reporter they've got now. Harry Sybert."

"I've noticed his by-line," George said. "What's *he* got against you, Jeff?"

"Damned if I know. Maybe he just wants to make good on his new job, or make a big splash in a new town. I don't know. But he's after my skin."

"You've handled tougher men than Harry Sybert, Jeff."

"Sure. But he's got the *Sentinel* behind him—and that means he's got the whole reform element behind him too. That's a rough combination. *Too* rough, maybe."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I told you. I'm going to find Piggy Ferris." He laughed shortly. "And the sooner the better."

"But how?" George asked.

"That's where you can help me—and that's why I didn't want Trudy tuning in on this." He took another swallow of his drink. A long one this time. "You remember telling me that you'd seen Ann Lynch someplace?"

"Yes. In New York. In a bar on Seventh Avenue."

"Did she say where she was staying?"

"She said where she was *going.* She said the guy she was with had about two weeks' business ahead of him in New York and that they were moving into the Glencannon that same afternoon. The Glencannon's on Central Park West, I think. Anyhow, I'd just delivered some pictures and had a few extra dollars, and we got lushed together."

"You got back from New York about ten days ago," Jeff said. "So that means she might still be there."

"Could be. Ann said that this guy was a real mark and that she'd never had it so good."

"Did she tell you the guy's name?"

George laughed. "That she did. Or at least the one he's using after business hours. She got a kick out of it. He's going under the name of Courtney Wolfe. Cute, eh? He'll change it back to Sheep, once *Ann* gets through with him."

Jeff's legs were cramped. He got up and stretched and sat down again. "Ann's come up in the world," he said absently. "The last I heard of her, she was a B-girl in Chicago."

"Come up is right," George said. "She's big time now, Jeff. She's hooked up with an outfit that books her just like any other kind of

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entertainment. She's available for engagements by the night, week or month. Hell, I remember, when she was peddling it around King City, how twenty bucks a night was a big deal for her. But now, if you mentioned twenty bucks, she'd spit right in your eye.

"The way she told me, it's two hundred a night now, or a thousand a week—and take your choice." He chuckled. "But the price goes down when you rent by the month. Guys take her to Miami and Bermuda in the winter and to Quebec in the summer. This guy Wolfe even wants to take her to Paris. Yes, Jeff—our little Annie has really come a long way."

"She say anything about Piggy?"

"Plenty," George said. "She can't put out the torch, Jeff. As I said, we got pretty well loaded in that bar and along there toward the end Piggy Ferris is all she'd talk about. She says she's saving her money, and that some day Piggy will come back to her. When that happens, she says, she's going to straighten him out, and straighten herself out, and then she's going to take him off somewhere out on the West Coast and buy him some kind of a business." He started and snapped his fingers. "Damn! I forgot! Listen, Jeff, Marcia called here for you. About ten o'clock. I promised her I'd have you call her if you came by, or if I heard from you." He stood up. "I'm sorry as hell. I just simply forgot all about it."

Jeff stood up too. "That's all right," he said. "I should have thought of it myself. I was supposed to go over there right after I got through down at the Department."

George whistled. "Boy, I sure don't envy you!"

Jeff let his breath out slowly and pushed open the door into the kitchen. "It's been a long time since I've gone off the deep end like this," he said. "Not that that will make it any easier to explain." He walked through the kitchen and the living room and into the alcove. Marcia's line was busy again. Jeff re-dialed, just to make certain he hadn't erred, and then slammed the phone down in its cradle. He grinned ruefully at George.

"She's on a party line with a lot of high school kids," he said. "There ought to be a law."

He looked toward the couch. Trudy was asleep now, he saw, and even as he watched she stirred and pushed the sheet away from the upper half of her body.

George stepped to the couch and covered her.

"She had a hard day," he said. "I kept her posing for over six hours. Sounds easy, doesn't it? You should try it some time."

Jeff smiled at him. "Calendars, George?"

George was staring down at Trudy, very tenderly. "No," he said.

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"A new gimmick. Pornographic brandy snifters. I hate to paint on glass, but the pay's good. I just did the sketches today. I do the actual painting with a magnifying glass. Lots of detail. Trouble is, you have to paint on the *inside* of the snifter, and it's hard to get a brush to work properly at that angle."

"And then you hold the glass up and look at the painting through the other side, eh, George?"

"Yes. You can buy a watered-down version in the five-and-dime. But you can't be much interested in my dirty pictures, Jeff. Just what do you intend to do now?"

"See Ann Lynch," Jeff said. "She'll know where Piggy Ferris is, if anybody does."

"You think that's wise?"

Jeff shrugged. "What else can I do?"

George frowned and crossed to the radio-phonograph and snapped it off. "Maybe it's none of my business, Jeff," he said, "but I'd hate to see you make things any worse for yourself."

"That'd be tough to do," Jeff said. "But I'll take it easy." He walked to the hall door. "Well, I guess I'd better get over to Marcia's and face the music."

"Jeff . . ."

Jeff turned. "Yeah, George?"

George came up close. He lowered his voice. "I was thinking. Maybe it'd be a good idea if you were to sort of get away for a while. A vacation. Fishing trip, maybe. You could use that cabin I rented out on Spanish Creek. The summer's almost over and I haven't been out there once."

Jeff shook his head. "Not for me, George. Piggy's my boy, and I'm going to get him."

"You've got to think of other people too, Jeff. It's not just you, you know."

Jeff looked at him narrowly. "That's all the more reason to stay with it, isn't it, George?"

George was silent a long moment. Then, "I don't know. Maybe you and Marcia would be better off if you forgot the whole business."

"You mean I should take it lying down?"

"No. I . . . Aw, hell, forget it, Jeff." He ran his hand through his graying hair and looked uncomfortably at the floor. "It's just that . . ."

"Just what?"

"Well, that you've got the wrong slant on things. You seem to feel that the Department did the wrong thing in booting you out."

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He wet his lips. "As if they weren't *justified*—as if you were being persecuted somehow."

Jeff became aware of the heat again, of the clammy crawl of sweat along his ribs and inside his arms. The only sound in the room was the slow, regular breathing from the girl on the couch. Finally he said, "And *you* don't, I take it."

George's voice was calm. "I'm your friend," he said patiently. "I simply think that you've been hitting it too hard. I think it might be a good idea if you were to take it easy for a couple of weeks."

Jeff knew he was completely sober now. The soothing effect of the whiskey had left him; his nerves were frayed again; all the starch had gone out of him. His eyes felt as if sand had been rubbed into them.

He said, "You're trying to tell me that I'm coming apart at the seams—is that it, George?"

George's eyes came up to Jeff's and stayed there. "I think you need a rest. A change. You're not the kind of man who would do what you did to that girl—unless you . . ."

"Unless I was cracking up?"

George's shoulders seemed to slump. "That's putting it pretty bluntly. But yes, I guess that's what I mean."

"You can't understand that, can you, George?"

"No," George said. "Frankly, I can't." His voice was very even. "Can you understand it, yourself?"

Jeff chewed at his lower lip, said nothing. He had been able, for a few minutes at a time, to forget his attack on Connie Knight, to push it into a back part of his mind by concentrating very hard on something else. But now it was there again, dragged out into the open by George Bishop.

"And you've got to think of Marcia," George said. "That girl's going through plenty, Jeff."

Jeff found his voice. "Don't you think *I* know that? Don't you think I'm *sorry*? Don't you think I realize what a crazy thing I did?"

"Take it easy," George said.

"Sure! *Take it easy!* Take it lying down, you mean!"

"You're only going to make things worse," George said. "And remember that Marcia . . ."

"Just whose friend *are* you, George? Mine or Marcia's?"

He saw the hurt come into George's eyes. George turned slowly and stood looking toward the black rectangle of the window.

"I'm sorry, George," Jeff said softly. "I didn't mean that."

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"Sure," George said. "It's all right."

Jeff glanced around the confusion of the room, at the empty beer cans on the floor, the scattered tubes of paint, the half dozen books spread out face down wherever George had happened to tire of them. He realized suddenly how much he had liked to come here—how much more it seemed like home than his own clean and orderly apartment.

"George."

"Yes?"

"No hard feelings?"

George shook his head slowly. "No hard feelings."

Jeff opened the door. As he stepped into the corridor, George said, "Take it easy, Jeff—and don't stay away so long next time," and the tone of his voice told Jeff that he wasn't just being polite. He meant it. George was one in a million.

He went down in the self-service elevator, walked to the parking lot behind the apartment house and got into the Plymouth. He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes a moment; he'd rest a few minutes before he drove over to Marcia's. Just long enough to let his nerves untangle. . . .

Mrs. Opal Bayless leaned her mop against a chair and waddled out to the ladies' room again. She had worked her way down from the fifth floor in record time tonight. Here it wasn't even midnight, and she was already half way through Mr. Copeland's office on the first floor. Another fast shot of gin and another hour's hard work, and she could be on her way home.

She lifted the top of the flush box in the first cubicle and reached down into the water for the flat pint of gin. She liked it cool, but not cold, and the flush box kept it exactly right. She gazed at the gin's level ruefully a moment before she tilted it to her lips. Enough for one more good drink and one short drink. She was glad there was another bottle at home just like it.

She put the bottle back, went to Mr. Copeland's office and walked to the window facing the alley between the Altman Building and the Barclay Court Apartments. A breath of air, and she'd pitch in again.

She saw it then, the slim white form lying there in the thin moonlight. White and naked and, she knew somehow—dead.

For an instant Mrs. Bayless felt as if she were going to scream. But only for an instant. She stood there, staring at the body, and slowly one pudgy hand went up to push the lank gray hair away from her forehead.

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She went to Mr. Copeland's desk and lifted the phone and dialed the operator. "Get me the police," she said. "Quick, girlie."

A man's voice rasped on the other end of the line and Mrs. Bayless said, "There's a dead girl in the alley between the Altman Building and the Barclay Court Apartments."

"All right," the man said. "Who's this calling?"

Mrs. Bayless put the phone down and hung the receiver on the hook. She wanted no part of this; she had reported the body and that was all she intended to do. She was too tired to hang around here all night.

She went back to the window and turned a desk lamp around so that it shone out into the alley. Well, she thought, so the girl ain't naked after all. But the way that robe's bunched up under her arms she might as well be. Pretty body. Never saw a prettier one, and that was for sure. But that face! Splattered over half the alley, it was! The kid must have taken a brody out a window to do that to herself. Sure. She'd hit flat on her face, and now she didn't have no face at all. What a bloody mess! And with that body, too. . . .

From across the city she heard the sudden keening of a police siren, rising and falling, growing louder by the second. She listened to it a moment, feeling just a little sick to her stomach, then she switched off the lamp and collected her mop and pail and took them out into the corridor. She turned off the overhead lights and waddled down the corridor to the ladies' room for her gin. When the police car squealed to a stop outside, Mrs. Bayless was busy scrubbing the floor of the H. T. Merrick & Co. office on the far side of the building.

Chapter Seven

MARCIA WEBSTER was dreaming. She had slept little that night, and the insistent buzzing of her electric alarm clock failed to wake her. Early morning sunlight slanted through the venetian blinds of her bedroom and fell across her bed in soft yellow bars.

In her dream, she was an Indian girl and she was wearing a heavy blanket even though the day was hot. She was wandering through the Forbidden Forest, where the elders of the tribe had warned her never to go, and it was like no forest she had ever seen. The trees

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were all thick-trunked, hardly taller than herself, and almost wholly without foliage—and as she walked among them they seemed to tremble, to bend slightly toward her. It was as if they held imprisoned evil spirits that were trying to escape, to get to her. She walked faster, feeling afraid of the trees now—and suddenly full-blown terror seized her and she began to run. But she was lost, and she ran blindly. The heavy blanket was stifling her and her body was laved with sweat, but she knew somehow that she had to keep it around her.

And then, ahead of her, loomed the largest tree of all. Twice as tall as the others, and twice as thick, and this tree trembled even more violently than all the rest.

She tried to change her course, to run away from the big tree, but she could not. Some force within her kept her running straight toward it; and just as she reached it, the tree burst into flame.

Then her fear was gone, and she knew only that she must put out the fire. She tore the blanket from her shoulders and beat at the flames, smothering them, crying softly while her young sweat-sheened body glistened in the sunlight. And when the flames were finally extinguished, she stood beside the blackened tree and laughed until the tears came. When the last wisp of smoke had died away, she turned and walked, proud and naked and erect, through the Forbidden Forest, knowing she would never be afraid again.

She awoke with a tiny startled cry and pushed herself up on one elbow to turn off the alarm clock. What a ridiculous dream! What nonsense! And she'd had so *many* dreams like that lately. . . .

And then she remembered Jeff, and that he hadn't come over last night as he'd promised. He hadn't even called. She'd been angry at first, and then concerned—and then frightened. She remembered how she had waited until almost four o'clock before deciding to go to bed.

Slowly, in spite of her efforts to fight it, the fear came back, and the apprehension, and the torment began again. What could have happened to him? She had called George Bishop, and Ed Bailey's Bar, and every other place she thought he might be; she had waited by the phone until the small black instrument had seemed to fill the room.

She sat up, pushed her feet into her mules and walked out to the bathroom and turned on the shower. She didn't feel like going to work but she knew she couldn't possibly face another day of waiting here in the apartment. Yesterday and last night had been bad enough; another day and night like them would be unbearable.

She showered quickly and slipped into a crisp yellow dress and

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went into the kitchen to put coffee on the stove, doing all the little habitual things as she always had done them, trying desperately to think of anything and everything but Jeff Stoner. Trying—but failing miserably.

While she waited for the coffee to perk, she went back into the living room and dialed the number of Jeff's apartment house. A tired female voice told her that Mr. Stoner didn't answer, and then volunteered the information that she had been on duty since midnight and she was quite sure Mr. Stoner had not come in, nor gone out, since then.

When Marcia arrived at the Disc Shop, she found she was almost half an hour early. She let herself in with her key and went immediately to work arranging the albums and checking the record players in the booths to make sure they were working properly. Then she put a long-playing record on the player near the counter and connected the speaker that hung just inside the doorway to attract customers from the street. She went through the sheaf of posters from the major recording companies and spread them out through the store, and when she had finished she was surprised to find that it still was not yet eight-thirty.

But she opened the front door, anyhow, and took her place behind the counter. The ornate clock over the second booth ticked JEFF—Jeff, JEFF—Jeff, and the thought came to her that being at work was no better than being at home. She wished suddenly that she hadn't come in. There'd be hardly any business at all until noon, and the long morning hours would drag.

The phone rang, and she felt her heart leap as she reached for it. It would be Jeff; she *knew* it!

"Marcia?" the man's voice said.

"Yes. Oh . . . hello, George."

"What's the matter?" he laughed. "You sound glum. You're not feuding with me this morning, are you?"

"No, George, of course not. It's just that, for a moment, I thought you were Jeff."

"You two finally got together last night, I guess?"

She grasped the phone more tightly. "No. What are you talking about?"

"Funny," George said. "He said he was going straight over to your place."

She sat down suddenly on the stool behind the counter. "Do you mean he came by your apartment last night?"

"Yes. He came by not too long after you called. He wasn't here

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long, and he said he had a date with you." She could hear nothing but the sound of his breath for several seconds, and then he said, "That's very strange. You didn't hear from him, eh?"

"No, George," Marcia said. "I didn't hear from him at all." She took a deep breath. "George, was . . . was he drunk?"

"No," George said firmly. "I got the impression that he had been —or was going to be—but he was sober enough while he was here."

"I see," Marcia said softly. "Well, George, what was it you had on your mind? I mean, unless you just called up to say good morning." She'd tried to force a note of friendly banter into her voice, and realized that she had not. So Jeff had gone by to see George and Trudy, and he'd been sober, and yet he hadn't kept his date with *her*—hadn't even phoned her!

"I called about the same subject," George said. "Jeff."

"What do you mean?"

"I think maybe it might be a good idea if we sort of had a talk about him, Marcia. He's my friend as well as yours, and, frankly, I'm a little worried about the guy. It isn't so much this thing with the girl—it's . . . well, call it a pattern. I think I see something shaping up, and I think he needs a hand. He won't listen to me; I tried to talk to him last night. But maybe, with both of us working at it, we might . . . Well, anyhow, Marcia, I think we'd better have a little talk." He paused. "When can you make it?"

She kept her voice level. "You're holding something from me, George. I'm not a child. What is it?"

"Now, Marcia!" George said quickly. "The last thing I want to do is alarm you. And I'm certainly not holding anything back. It's just that I think that we, jointly, could help Jeff over a pretty rough spot."

Marcia thought a moment. "Would my lunch hour be all right?"

"Fine," George said. "I'll drive down and park in the lot across the street. We can talk in the car."

"All right," Marcia said. "At one o'clock."

"One o'clock," George said, and hung up.

Marcia put the phone down slowly, almost reluctantly. What was it that George hadn't been willing to discuss over the phone? What had happened? And where in heaven's name was Jeff now?

Tommy Bixby, her boss, came in and smiled and went directly to the stock room, and a few moments later Gloria Simms, the other salesgirl, came in and joined her behind the counter. Gloria was short and pert and pretty. "Boy!" she whispered. "Am I hung under!"

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Marcia said nothing, staring at the record catalogues on the counter before her.

"What's with *you?*" Gloria asked petulantly. "No sympathy?"

Marcia smiled. "I'm sorry," she said.

"A lot on your mind, huh, kid?"

"I guess so."

"Hmmmm. Well, if I had a hunk of cop like Jeff Stoner on *my* mind, I wouldn't look so sad-mouthed, baby. What's the matter? He rough you up a little?" She laughed. "Don't let it worry you, honey. A man who don't do that once in a while ain't worth having. Take it from me; I've had all kinds."

Marcia let it pass. Why couldn't Gloria keep her inane chatter to herself? What could *she* know—about *anything?*

"Well!" Gloria giggled. "Look who's here!"

Marcia glanced toward the door. Gil Phelps stood there, blond and big and smiling, and Marcia's instant thought was: He's come about Jeff! Something's happened to him!

Gil sauntered to the counter, impeccably dressed in a gray tropical, moving gracefully, for a man of his size.

"And our first customer, too!" Gloria said breathlessly. "Well, well, well!"

Gil smiled at her. "Gloria," he said pleasantly, "why don't you run off somewhere? Go back and lock yourself in a booth, or something."

"Listen, you!" Gloria said. "For one thin dime I'd . . ."

"Sure," Gil said softly. "Now, get lost."

Gloria started to say something else, then closed her mouth tightly and glared first at Gil and then at Marcia.

"Please, Gloria," Marcia said.

"So!" Gloria said tightly. "So *that's* how it is!"

Gil stared at her, and now his smile was very cold. Gloria hesitated a moment, then walked to the far end of the counter and began to rearrange a sapphire-needle display.

Marcia looked at Gil expectantly, trying to keep her panic from showing on the surface. "Well, Gil . . . ?"

His smile widened and he leaned forward across the counter.

"Just a friendly visit, Marcia," he said. "You don't mind?"

"No. Why should I?" She wished he'd quit baiting her—that he'd say whatever it was he had come to say, and get out. "You're quite a stranger," she said casually.

"Maybe we can change all that," he smiled. "Now that you're back in circulation again."

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She felt suddenly very weak, almost too weak to stand.

"What—what do you mean by that?" she managed.

He shrugged massive shoulders. "I know you pretty well, Marcia. Well enough to know you wouldn't stick with Jeff after what he did to that girl down at Headquarters." He laughed softly, confidently. "Right?"

"Wrong," Marcia said bitterly. "You've never been more wrong in your life, Gil Phelps! Or more asinine!"

The smile on Phelps' handsome face widened even further.

"You're not kidding anybody," he said mildly. "You don't go for that kind of a rat, and we both know it."

Marcia felt the quick surge of blood in her temples. "Please get out," she said. "Get out, and stay out."

Phelps smoothed the knot in his tie and winked at her. "You'll come around," he said. "Sooner or later. You were dropped pretty hard, and you're plenty sore from it—but you'll come around."

"For the last time," Marcia said, "will you get out of here?"

"Sure," Phelps said. "Sure. Like I said, it was just a friendly visit." He took a step away from the counter, and then turned and came back again. "You read the papers yet?"

"Just leave," Marcia said. "That's all. Just leave."

"Your big rough hero got canned too soon," Phelps told her. "Too bad he isn't still around to help us find Piggy Ferris by beating up his girl friend. We *really* want Piggy now—for frying purposes."

"What?" Marcia asked.

His eyes roved over the upthrust curves beneath the sheer yellow dress. Reluctantly, they came back to her face.

"Connie Knight—Piggy's girl—got hers last night. Somebody got her little white throat in his hands and shut her up forever. And then he tossed her out the window. She lit right on her face." He shook his head slowly. "Very pretty."

Marcia shuddered. "How horrible. . . ."

"Yeah, isn't it? Well, like they say, I'll still be around." He walked to the door. "Goodbye, Gloria," he said as he passed her.

"You go to hell!" Gloria muttered.

"Sure," Gil said and stepped out into the bright sunshine.

"That bastard," Gloria said. "Sometimes I . . ." And then she glanced up and saw Tommy Bixby coming toward her with an armload of albums and she got very busy with the needle display.

Marcia made up her mind suddenly. "Tommy," she said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to go home."

"Sick?"

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Marcia nodded.

"All right, then. Come back if you feel better."

"I will," Marcia said. She got her purse from beneath the counter and started toward the door.

"Well!" Gloria said. "Of all the nerve!"

Marcia ignored her: there was no room in her mind just now for the attitude of Gloria Simms. No more than there was for that of Gil Phelps. There was room only for Jeff Stoner. She had had a thought that disturbed her more than anything else—that he might be *home*. It hadn't occurred to her before, but now it possessed her completely. He might be sick, or hurt, or something, and unable to call. *He might even have been there all night that way.*

As she walked to the corner to catch a cab, she looked in her purse to make certain she had the key Jeff had given her, the key to his apartment which, until now, she had never had occasion to use.

She knocked on Jeff's door, waited a few moments, and then let herself inside the apartment. She walked quickly through the living room to the bedroom, then to the bath and kitchen—and that was it. She came back to the living room, disappointment sickening through her, and sat down on Jeff's sofa.

There was nothing she could do now but wait. She thought about George Bishop's suggestion that they have a talk about Jeff, and once again she wondered why he felt it necessary to keep something from her. That wasn't like George; it wasn't like him at all. He'd always been frank and direct, and evasion of the truth was not one of his failings.

She was filled with unrest and she got to her feet and wandered around the living room, trying to occupy her mind.

And then she saw the painting.

She had missed it, in her first cursory glance about the room, and now she walked to the fireplace and examined it carefully. She recognized the girl instantly. Trudy Stevens—the young girl who was living with George Bishop. She stared at Trudy's nude figure, the dark-eyed face that smiled back at her, and was surprised to find that she was experiencing something very close to jealousy; or, at the very least, an intense resentment toward such a painting being here in her fiance's apartment.

She had met Trudy and she knew that George's painting had not lied about her face and figure. Trudy really was that pretty, she reflected. Maybe even prettier. And now the question was: What

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was Jeff doing with it over his fireplace? Could it possibly be that Jeff and Trudy . . . But no! That was ridiculous. Trudy wasn't much more than a child. Still—George Bishop was older than Jeff, and . . . Oh, hell! She was inventing things again! Probably George had given the painting to Jeff, and Jeff had kept it out of loyalty to George, or something like that.

But the painting had started another train of thought. She sat back down on the sofa and let the new fear seep into her mind. Could it be that Jeff had found someone else? Could *that* be the reason he hadn't come home? Hadn't even called her? She knew intuitively that he loved her—but was 'love' enough, without the other?

She listened to the traffic sounds from the street below, acutely conscious now of the mannish smell of the apartment, the slight disarray of furniture and books and pipes and records that told her a *man* lived here—not a story-book hero with no human drives and appetites.

She felt the hot rush of blood up through her throat and into her face. *She wanted him too, darn it!* But *she* could wait. He hadn't been able to understand the way she felt about it—why she wouldn't go to bed with him. He hadn't said so, but she knew he thought it was because of some lack in himself.

She knew that he had never been used to girls who didn't, and that her denial had caused him to suffer. She had wanted to wait until they were married, so that it would be right and good—so that it would be the most wonderful thing in the world for both of them.

And yet, with another part of her mind, she had known all along that she was *wrong*. A wedding ring was a small solid object—a symbol—and nothing more.

The terrifying truth of the matter was that she could have driven Jeff to another girl's arms.

She lay back on the sofa and brought her feet up on the cushions, and stared wide-eyed at the ceiling. What a fool I've been, she thought. What a silly, selfish fool!

Someone in the next apartment turned on a radio. The music, just barely audible, intruded on her thoughts and she debated for a moment whether or not she should get up and go home. She decided against it; she wanted to be here when Jeff came home—if he *did* come home. . . .

She listened to the music and closed her eyes and tried to think of nothing. Her fear and apprehension had abated somewhat: if it was merely *another girl* she had to worry about, then there was

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only one thing to do. And, strangely, the thought brought with it no self-reproach, no feeling of guilt. If she felt anything, it was the pleasant anticipation of something she had wanted to do for a very long time.

Chapter Eight

IT SEEMED to Jeff Stoner that he had heard a car door being opened somewhere nearby, only a few feet away, and that now something was tugging at his clothing. Not at his clothing, exactly, but at something in his right hip pocket.

His wallet! He came awake suddenly and twisted around on the car seat and grabbed both of the hands of the small boy who had been picking his pocket.

The boy was about ten, Jeff guessed, and he kicked out at Jeff and tried to sink his teeth in Jeff's wrist. "Lemme go!" he cried. "Lemme go, mister!"

Jeff caught both the boy's wrists in one big hand and twisted him around so that the flailing tennis shoes could do no harm. With his other hand he flipped the wallet open and saw that nothing had been taken from it.

So I was being rolled, he thought. Just like any other drunk. . . .

"I'll never do it again, mister!" the boy whined. "Honest, I won't!"

Jeff looked at him, at the old-young face, the shrewd and acquisitive eyes, the eyes that knew more than a boy of ten should ever know. I asked for it, he thought. I've been asking for a lot, lately.

He said, "Suppose I do let you go . . . then what?"

"I'll never do it again! I just . . ."

Jeff released his grip on the boy's wrists. "Get going," he said. He watched him scramble out of the car and race across the parking lot. At the edge of the lot, he paused long enough to thumb his nose at Jeff, and then he raced off again toward the dark mouth of an alley.

Jeff grinned sourly and looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes after nine—which meant that Marcia would already be at work. Well, she'd only be embarrassed if he went by the Disc Shop to make his explanations . . . maybe it would be better to go

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home and call her from there. He wondered how many words he'd be able to get in before she hung up on him.

He started the Plymouth and wormed it out onto the street. He felt a lot better than he had any right to feel, he decided. No hangover, and, except for being a little cramped from his position on the front seat, he felt more rested than he had in days. If only he hadn't goofed off about calling Marcia. . . .

At the next corner, he pulled to the curb and bought a copy of the *Sentinel* and put the folded paper on the seat beside him without glancing at it. Time enough for that after he'd called Marcia.

When he opened the door of his apartment and saw her lying there asleep on his sofa, he realized suddenly the full extent of the concern he had caused her. The instant feeling of self-reproach that filled him was as strong us any he had ever known. He closed the door quietly and crossed to the sofa and stood looking down at her.

It's always girls like Marcia that pick out the worst stinkers, he thought. It never fails.

He went out into the kitchen, made two cups of powdered coffee and brought them back to the living room and shook Marcia gently by the shoulder.

Her eyes opened slowly, clear and gray and smiling at him—and then she frowned and the full red lips worked themselves into a pout. She sat up and smoothed the yellow dress down over her knees and looked at him darkly. "Where *were* you all night?" she asked.

Jeff handed her one of the cups and grinned. He had expected it to be worse than this—a whole lot worse. Quickly, then, he began to explain what he had done and what had happened to him. As he talked, he could see by Marcia's eyes that she had already forgiven him. She might wait a while before she unbent enough to smile at him again, but everything was going to be all right. And then, as he started to tell of his visit to Connie Knight's apartment, Marcia's eyes suddenly widened and she gasped.

"Jeff!"

He broke off, staring at her. "What's the matter?"

"That Knight girl! She—she was murdered!"

Her words seemed to hang suspended in the air. Jeff stood quite still while they echoed and reechoed through his brain. A little of the steaming coffee sloshed out of the cup and scalded across his thumb and he set the cup and saucer down slowly on the cocktail table.

"Murdered?" he heard himself say. "Connie Knight was murdered?" Marcia's face had paled, he saw. And something was build-

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ing in her eyes. Something close to horror. She hadn't moved, and yet she seemed to want to cringe from him, as if the smallest movement on his part would put her to flight.

"When?" he asked her. "And how?"

"Last night," she said. "Someone choked her and threw her body out the window."

And now, belatedly, he knew the reason for her horror. He knew what she was thinking, what she *must* be thinking. . . .

"I had nothing to do with it, Marcia," he said evenly. He leaned down and took her by the shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. "*I didn't do it.* Do you understand?"

She stared at him, trembling. A pink tonguetip came out to wet her lips.

"You've got to believe that," he said. "I was there only a few minutes. Maybe not more than two minutes altogether. She told me to get out, and that's exactly what I did. I didn't touch her. Not in any way. I didn't even get close to her."

He felt some of the trembling tenseness leave her body. Slowly, very slowly, the gray eyes lost their expression of horror. They became troubled and concerned. She caught her full lower lip between small white teeth and held it there.

"You've got to believe that," he said again. "You've got to." He released her shoulders and sat down on the sofa beside her.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Gil Phelps came by the shop this morning," she said. "He told me." She reached out and put her saucer and cup on the cocktail table beside Jeff's, obviously struggling to regain her composure.

"But who did it?" Jeff asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Gil said it was in the papers."

Jeff got up and went back to the fireplace and took the folded *Sentinel* from the mantel where he had placed it when he first came in. He spread the paper out as he walked back to the sofa and sat down again. It was there, all right. All over the front page. A three-column story and a cut of Connie Knight in a light-colored dress and white spike-heeled shoes. An amateur's snapshot, blurred and grainy, that had left most of her face in shadow.

He held the paper over so that Marcia could read it, too.

"I don't want to read it," she said. "Jeff—have you eaten anything this morning? I'll bet you haven't."

"Eaten? No. I don't want anything."

"You're going to have something, anyhow," Marcia said gently. "I'm going to fix breakfast—if there's anything in your icebox." She stood up.

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Jeff was studying the blown-up snapshot. "All right," he said absently. Except for the caption, the picture could have passed for that of any other young girl of about the same general description. The *Sentinel*, he reflected, must have been pretty rushed to have to use a morgue shot like this. The later editions would have better pictures. Connie Knight was an entertainer, and the *Sentinel* would have no trouble finding juicier, leggier shots of her for their follow-up stories.

"How many eggs?" Marcia asked as she walked toward the kitchen. Her voice, Jeff noticed with relief, sounded almost normal again.

"Four," he said. "I'm not hungry, but I guess I'd better eat."

He began to read, rapidly but carefully, the story of Connie Knight's murder.

NIGHT CLUB SINGER SLAIN
BODY FOUND IN ALLEY

Police early this morning discovered the nearly nude body of Miss Connie Knight, well-known local songstress, in the alley behind her apartment house on Emmert Street. The redhaired beauty, police said, had been brutally strangled and her body thrown from the window of her eighth floor apartment, where she had lived alone.

When found, Miss Knight's body was clothed only in a thin robe, police told this newspaper, and immediate identification was impossible due to the hideously mangled condition of her face caused by the eight-story plunge to the alley. She was finally identified by a neighbor, who remembered the robe, as well as a scar on Miss Knight's left ankle.

Though police admit having no immediate clue to the identity of the slayer, this newspaper learned unofficially that they expect quick solution of the murder, and that an intensive statewide search is underway for a man already sought for questioning in connection with a major jewel robbery. This information came to the Sentinel *from a highly reliable source, and has led experienced observers to the conclusion that the unnamed man is Charles (Piggy) Ferris. Miss Knight, readers will recall, was questioned recently by police in an attempt to determine Ferris' present whereabouts. At that time, police emphasized that she was not involved in the robbery, and she was released in a matter of hours.*

The District Attorney's office, together with Detective Lieu-

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tenant Gilbert Phelps, named to head the investigation, jointly promised a round-the-clock . . .

Jeff finished the story, which was continued on Page 3, but there was no more meat in the paragraphs that followed. The *Sentinel* had devoted the rest of the story to a rehash of Connie Knight's musical career, her exploits with underworld characters, and several more references to the appearance of her nearly nude body.

Jeff refolded the paper and put it down and walked out into the kitchen. Marcia was at the stove, heaping scrambled eggs and bacon onto a plate. She smiled at him, a little wanly, and put the plate on the table.

"You'll have to get along without toast," she said. "There wasn't any bread."

He grinned. "Toast is one thing I can take or leave alone," he told her. He began to eat, but somehow the fluffy golden eggs were hard to get down. He ate hurriedly, to get it over with, and by the time Marcia had finished making fresh coffee, he had done the best he could. He pushed the plate back and lit a cigarette.

Marcia put the coffee cups on the table and sat down across from him.

"They're looking for Piggy Ferris," he said.

"That's what Gil said."

"The *Sentinel* has already convicted him." He studied Marcia's face, remembering the way she had looked when he told her about his visit to Connie Knight's apartment. He couldn't have expected much else, he realized, and yet. . . .

She glanced up at him, and flushed, and as if she had intuitively known what was troubling him, she said, "Darling, I hope you didn't think . . . I mean, I was so upset and all that when . . . Oh, Jeff, you *know* I never for a second thought that you . . ."

"Sure," he said quickly. "I know how it must have been, Baby. Forget it."

She went through the motions of stirring her coffee and tasting it and putting it down again. Then, "Jeff, I had a phone call from George Bishop this morning. He thinks we should have a talk—about you."

"Oh?"

"He seems to think that you need help, or something."

"George thinks too much. He told me I needed a vacation. Offered to loan me his fishing shack on Spanish Creek."

"Maybe it's a good idea," she said.

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"There are a lot of good ideas floating around," he told her. "But I can't do it. Anyhow, not just yet. I've got to find Piggy Ferris, Marcia. And I've got to find him fast."

"But Jeff . . ."

"I've got to find him before the Department finds out that I went to see Connie last night. Once they know *that*, then they might forget all about Piggy." He hated to worry her any further, but there was no way around it. "Let's face it. After all, I *was* at her place last night, and I *did* get pretty rough with her at Headquarters. A cop like Gil Phelps could make a lot out of that, Marcia."

"Jeff! They couldn't possibly . . ."

"They can," Jeff said. "And they would. With Gil Phelps in charge of the case, it's almost a lead-pipe cinch."

"Do you really think Gil hates you that much?"

"That much, and more. I don't know that he'd deliberately frame me, but I do know he'd put a case together. A strong one. He'd *want* to believe I killed her. He'd want to believe it so much that he *would* believe it."

"But, Jeff—they think Piggy Ferris did it!"

"That's because they don't know about *my* being there. The papers didn't say when the coroner had fixed the time of death. Not that it makes much difference. Whenever it was, I won't have an alibi for it. I was blacked out most of the time, except for the few minutes I spent with George."

"I'll tell them that you were with me," she said quietly. "I'll swear I was with you every minute."

He shook his head. "You're wonderful, Baby—but that's no good. In the first place there's been too much telephoning—your calling George, for instance—and there's a good chance somebody who knows me saw me last night. *Alone*. I might even have been seen somewhere around Connie's apartment house. Thanks, darling . . . but it's too risky. If you tried to alibi me, and the Department found out you'd lied, you'd be in trouble. Bad trouble."

"But how would they *know* I wasn't telling the truth? It'd be my word against somebody else's, wouldn't it?"

"Not by the time they got through with you. And besides, if they found out I'd tried to establish a phony alibi, it would clinch things. That's all Phelps would need.

"And there's another thing. George would go along with us on it, all right, but Trudy Stevens is something else again. I've a hunch she'd like nothing better than to knock our story into a cocked hat."

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Marcia was silent a long moment. Then, "Jeff, what are you going to *do*?"

"Find Piggy. And find him fast."

"But how?"

He rubbed his cigarette out slowly in his saucer. "I'm sorry, Baby," he said softly. "But I can't tell you. The less you know, the less you're involved—and that's the way it's got to be."

He got up and went around to her chair and pulled it out for her. She looked up at him, puzzled. "Are you going someplace?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm taking you home."

"And then . . . ?"

"Then I start trying to find Piggy."

She turned slowly, frowning a little, and went back into the living room for her purse. Jeff moved to the front door, watching the lithe swing of her hips beneath the snug yellow dress.

And suddenly it was there again, the hungry yearning for her. He wet his lips, fighting it, knowing it was futile to torture himself this way—but it was there, and it was strong and urgent; nothing that had ever happened before this instant, or would ever happen again, seemed important. He was aware of nothing but Marcia.

He watched her pick up her purse, and turn, and come back toward the door. When she was very close to him, he reached out and took her in his arms. Her reaction surprised him. She dropped her purse to the floor, her arms went around his neck, and her body mashed against his from knee to shoulder. He heard a tiny moan escape her throat, and then her lips were warm and damp and demanding against his own and her fingers were digging themselves into his neck and back.

He held her tightly. For just an instant he felt her shuddering against him—and then she was pushing away from him, almost fighting him.

"No," she whispered hoarsely. "No, Jeff . . ." Her fingers closed on his wrist and she pulled his hand away. "Please, Jeff!"

His throat was dry; there was a pounding in his temples.

"I want to," she said. "But I can't. I thought I could, but . . . but I just can't."

Jeff lowered his hands slowly. His palms were sweating; he rubbed them against the sides of his slacks and felt the trembling along the hard muscles of his legs.

They stood there for long seconds, staring at one another.

Then Marcia bent quickly and lifted her purse and turned toward the door. There was a huskiness in her voice as she said, "I'm ready now, Jeff."

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He opened the door for her and followed her out into the corridor. His whole body ached for her, throbbed for her. He was sick with his need for her.

But he said, "I'm sorry, Baby. That'll be the last time."

At the elevator she paused and stood very close to him again. "Jeff, darling," she said in a small voice, "I think it's time we got married."

He started to take her in his arms, but the elevator doors slid open, and a middle-aged couple came out. The male operator chewed his gum furiously.

They rode down to the street floor in silence. In the foyer, Jeff said, "It's not only time we got married. It's past time. But it won't be long, Baby. No longer than it takes to find Piggy. We don't want any dark clouds hanging over us, do we?"

She smiled. "No, Jeff. No dark clouds."

Chapter Nine

AN HOUR and a half later, after he had taken Marcia home and returned to his apartment just long enough to change to a light summer suit and stuff a briefcase with an extra shirt and socks and toilet articles, Jeff boarded the twelve o'clock train for New York. He went directly to the club car, ordered bourbon and water, and spent the next twenty minutes ignoring the speculative glances of the leggy brunette across the aisle from him and thinking about Piggy Ferris.

It was hard to picture Piggy as a murderer. Jeff knew him to be a handsome, personable man with only two minor convictions on his record, an uncanny way with women of all ages and on both sides of the law, and an almost pathological abhorrence of bloodshed. A big-time grifter, a long con artist, a man with pride both in his trade and in the fact that he had never carried a gun. Even when Piggy had abandoned his criminal pattern to pull the jewel job, he had worked without a weapon.

He had waited until the jeweler was standing before his open vault, his back to Piggy. Piggy had simply pushed, locked the vault door, helped himself to forty thousand dollars' worth of medium-sized, easily fenced stones, and sauntered out. A few minutes later, he had called the police, saying that he was concerned about the

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jeweler's health and wondered if they would mind letting him out.

And, except for the police stoolie who had seen him leave, he would have made a clean haul.

Jeff swirled the ice cubes around in his glass and frowned. It didn't figure for a cool character like Piggy Ferris to buy himself a sure ticket to the chair. And it sure as hell wasn't like him to choke a girl to death and throw her out the window, just because he was afraid she might blow the whistle on him.

The leggy brunette smiled at him again and crossed her legs the other way. In spite of himself, Jeff caught his gaze roving over the display of sleekly-filled nylon. He hadn't entirely recovered from his little session with Marcia, he suddenly realized, and the brunette's legs were bringing back the full impact of that moment, together with all of its symptoms.

He drained his glass quickly and went back to finish the remainder of the short trip in a day coach.

At Grand Central Station, he stopped at the first phone booth he came to and looked up the number of the Glencannon.

His dime bought him the information that Mrs. Wolfe was out but that she had left a telephone number. Jeff hung up and dialed again.

He heard the bar sounds of jukebox and laughter and glasses tinkling, and a man's voice said, "Brick Yard."

"What's the address there?" Jeff asked.

The man told him, and Jeff said thanks and hung up. The Brick Yard, it seemed, was in Greenwich Village. He was in no mood for the subway, and went up to the street level for a taxi. He told the driver where he wanted to go. The driver leered at him, shrugged, and kept his mouth firmly shut for the entire trip.

The Village, in mid-afternoon, was almost deserted. Jeff was no stranger to the area, but the Brick Yard itself was new to him. It turned out to be another cellar bar, dingy on the outside and dingier on the inside. Dark and noisy and crowded.

Crowded with women.

Except for the two bartenders, Jeff was the only man in the place. Strictly speaking. . . .

Mannish suits and flat-heeled shoes and too-short haircuts were nowhere to be seen. But it was there, *the look*, something indescribably masculine in the eyes that brushed him and looked away again without interest. The superior, faintly contemptuous appraisal of the lesbian.

They ranged from teen-agers to women old enough to be his

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grandmother, from plain-faced girls to stunning beauties, and there was nothing guarded or inhibited or self-conscious about any one of them.

He spotted Ann Lynch's gold-red hair instantly. She was sitting at the far end of the bar, facing away from him, talking to an extremely pretty blonde girl in blue shirt and jeans.

Jeff moved through the scattered, chessboard-size tables and took the bar stool next to her. He felt disoriented, here amid all the female sounds and smells, in this other world where he was trespassing. It was very uncomfortable.

A bartender came up and Jeff ordered bourbon and water.

Ann Lynch whirled around on her stool. "Jeff! Jeff Stoner!"

Jeff grinned. "Hello, Ann."

"I'd know that damn voice anywhere! Well, what do you know!"

"Buy you a drink?"

"Sure." She made a lazy, shuttling motion with her hand between Jeff and the blonde girl. "Jeff, this is Nadine. Nadine, Jeff."

The blonde said, "Hi," and smiled, without the smile quite reaching her wide blue eyes.

Jeff nodded. "Hello, Nadine. What'll it be?"

"Tom Collins," Ann said.

"Same thing, I guess," Nadine said, and Jeff wondered if the pout on her red lips was natural with her, or whether it was because he was interrupting something. Funny, he thought . . . he'd never figured Ann for a girl who was fond of the ladies. But then, he'd never figured Piggy Ferris for a strangler, either.

"Well," Ann smiled, "what brings you to New York, Jeff?"

"Business," Jeff said. He wondered how hard it was going to be to get rid of the blonde girl. He couldn't very well get down to cases while she was still tuned in on the conversation.

"Police business?" Ann asked.

"No. Just my own."

"So you're a *cop*," Nadine said. Her teeth were small and sharp, and she made the word sound as if it had a bad taste to it.

Jeff let it go. "I'd like to talk to you, Ann," he said.

"Why, of course, darling. Nadine and I were just killing time, anyhow." She turned to smile at Nadine. "Weren't we, pet?"

"It's beginning to look like it," Nadine said sourly.

Ann laughed and turned back to Jeff. "What shall we talk about, darling?"

The bartender put their drinks before them. Jeff paid for them and waved away the change. "It can wait," he said with a casual-

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ness he didn't feel. "Maybe later. Whenever you have a few free moments."

"Well!" Nadine said. "I like that. I *really* like that, Mr. Cop!"

"No offense," Jeff said. "Just a little business. You know how it is."

Ann was still smiling, but now the smile wasn't quite sure of itself. "You're certain this isn't police business?" she asked.

Jeff picked up his drink and sampled it and set it down again. He shook his head. Why couldn't the blonde girl find another playmate for a few minutes? Did you have to hit her on the top of her yellow head to make her take a hint?

Ann turned her head slowly and said, "Nadine, doll, would you mind terribly if Mr. Stoner and I . . . ?"

"Yes," Nadine said tightly. "I would mind. I'd mind like hell. We had a date—remember?"

"But, pet . . ."

To Jeff's amazement, Nadine looked very much as if she were going to cry. "It never fails," she said. "Never!"

"Listen, Nadine," Jeff said patiently. "You're making something out of nothing. This will take only a couple of minutes."

"To hell with you, Mr. Cop," she said. "I know a goaty guy when I see one. Save your breath."

"Darling!" Ann said. "Please."

Nadine glared at Jeff a moment. "Oh, *all right!*" she said. She slid off her stool and flounced back toward the door under the neon sign that said *She*.

"You'll have to forgive her," Ann laughed. "Young girls can develop *such* serious crushes. She's really quite childlike at times."

"I can believe it," Jeff said.

"Now, Jeff—what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Piggy," he said.

Her smile stayed where it was, which surprised him.

"Piggy," she repeated. "Dear Piggy." She shook a cigarette from the package on the bar before her and waited until Jeff lighted it. She let the smoke out lazily through her nose, her eyes not quite meeting Jeff's. "Poor, lost little Piggy . . ."

"The King City cops would like to talk to him about some jewelry."

"Yes. Poor little Piggy—the dirty little son of a bitch." She was still smiling, but there were cold lights in her eyes now. If—as George had said—she was still carrying a torch for Piggy, that torch was no longer burning, Jeff decided. Either that, or it was burning

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hotter than ever. With women like Ann, you never knew. Feeling one way while acting another was their stock in trade. One thing seemed certain: although she had known Piggy was wanted, she *didn't* know he was wanted for *murder*.

She was even more beautiful than he'd remembered. And sleeker, more confident. For Ann Lynch, the lean days were far behind.

"I thought you told me this wasn't police business," she said.

"Not officially. I'm not on the Force any longer, Ann."

"Oh . . . ?"

"You hadn't heard?"

"No."

"I'll tell you about it sometime. Right now, I'd like to talk about Piggy. Where he is, for instance."

"That's a good question."

"Do you know?"

She smiled at him. "That's an even better question."

Jeff returned the smile. "You can't shoot a guy for trying."

"Not unless he tried too hard." She twisted around on the bar stool so that she faced him. "I saw George Bishop the other day. Did he tell you?"

"He said you got a little spiffed together."

"Love that George," she said. "I'm getting a little spiffed again. Can you tell?"

He shook his head.

"Well," she said, "I am. And I'm going to get a lot more spiffed before I get through. That's what I feel like doing, and so that's what I'm going to do." She finished her Tom Collins. "And," she said, "Courtney Wolfe can go to hell."

"And how about Nadine?" he asked.

"She can go with him. I'm tired of *both* of them."

"About Piggy . . ." he said.

"*Shhhhh*, darling. This is no place to talk about pigs."

He forced himself to grin at her.

She put her face very close to his. "Let's say I *did* know where he was. I don't, you understand, darling. But—if I *did*—well, what would there be in it for li'l Annie?"

"Reward, you mean?"

"Reward is exactly what I mean, darling."

He thought a moment. The temptation was terrific, but he stuck to the facts. "The jewels were insured, of course."

"Of course." Her shoulder was touching his now. "And talk softer, darling."

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"If the insurance company got the jewels back, they'd talk business, naturally."

"Naturally. And about *how much* business do you think they'd be willing to talk?"

He finished his drink and caught the bartender's eye and ordered fresh drinks for both of them. The warmth of Ann's leg was heavy against his thigh. He hadn't noticed it at first, but now he sensed that she was either pretty well oiled, or rapidly getting that way, which, he decided, was just fine. It could make things a lot easier.

"How much?" she asked again.

Jeff waited until the new drinks were before them and the bartender had moved away. "Depends on a lot of different things. A deal like that has to be handled carefully. There has to be a middle man, and one thing or another. If it were handled right, and all the jewels were there, they'd probably go as high as ten thousand."

Her eyes trailed away from his. She lifted her glass, turning it slowly in her fingers, studying it. "You know, Jeff," she said softly, "this is all very interesting."

He listened to the rise and fall of the feminine voices around him. It took all kinds, he reflected. Women like these, and like Ann Lynch, and men like Gil Phelps and Harry Sybert and Piggy Ferris. Maybe there was a common denominator somewhere, but it was pretty hard to root out.

"There's one thing, though . . ." Ann was saying. She turned and put her face close to his again. "And that's what *you'd* get out of it."

"I was kicked off the Force," Jeff said evenly. "If I walked in with Piggy, with or without the jewels, I could start being a cop again. Grabbing the jewels too, would help naturally."

"And that's what you want . . . that's *all* you want—to get back on the cops?"

"That's all," Jeff said.

Hmmmmm. I wonder . . ."

"Wonder what?"

She shrugged. "Oh . . . nothing. I—I don't suppose there's any way a girl could be sure that Piggy would never find out who—who talked out of school?"

"If it were handled right," Jeff said.

"You're sure?"

"Dead sure."

She shuddered and grimaced. "Don't use that word. That's what a girl would be if he *did* find out, you know. Dead."

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"He'd be in prison."

"Not forever. And besides, he has friends."

"I could handle it," Jeff said.

She laughed again. "No use being too serious, is there? After all, we're both just kidding. Aren't we, darling?"

"Sure," Jeff said. "Just kidding."

Jeff saw the door at the back open and Nadine's blonde head appear. He watched her approaching them, her eyes sullen, and he said, "Let's get out of here, Ann."

"But why?"

"Your friend's coming."

"Call me," Ann said. "Tonight. About seven-thirty. I know you didn't wander in here by coincidence. George gave you my phone number, yes?"

He nodded. "But . . ."

"No buts, darling. I can't run out on Nadine. I'd never hear the end of it." Then, more softly. "Business before pleasure, Jeff, you know. And with Nadine, there's money involved." As she turned on the stool to greet Nadine she gave him a good-bye smile. "Seven-thirty, then?"

"Seven-thirty." He put money on the bar for the drinks and got up just as Nadine gave him a hate-filled look and climbed back on her stool beside Ann Lynch. "So you finally got rid of the bastard," she said loudly. "*Men!* How I hate them!"

Chapter Ten

TO JEFF STONER, killing time in Greenwich Village, it seemed the afternoon would never end. He felt the urgent need to *do* something, to get started on the trail of Piggy Ferris. He thought several times of going back to the Brick Yard, to hurry things along, but his better judgment told him that this was something he couldn't push.

He spent an hour in a bar on Christopher Street. A little later he went into a restaurant and ordered a steak dinner. But when the steak came, he stared at it and at the French fries and sliced tomatoes—and pushed the plate away. He needed it, but he couldn't eat it. He paid his check and tipped the waiter and went out to wander the narrow, crooked streets again.

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A hundred questions hammered relentlessly in his brain. A hundred questions—and not one answer. He wondered what could have put out Ann Lynch's torch for Piggy Ferris. Another woman? Probably. It was hard to think of any other reason that would have caused such a complete reversal in Ann's feelings toward him.

He thought about the way Gil Phelps would be working on this case—methodically and relentlessly, leaving no possible lead unchecked. A foul ball, Gil—as a man. But a damn good cop.

Gil's shadow, police reporter Harry Sybert, was the guy to watch. He was a soured, sadistic mess of inferiority complex with a mad on at the whole world.

He'd have to get hold of himself! He was thinking in circles as well as walking in them. He went into Nick's and had two double shots. Then he came out and walked up the street to Julius' and had two more. From then until seven-thirty, it was like that, bar after bar and drink after drink, except that he stuck to single shots and limited himself to one in each place.

At exactly seven-thirty he went into a bar on 10th Street and called the Glencannon. While he waited for the operator to ring Ann's room, he held his hand out flat in front of his eyes, and congratulated himself. No nerves; none at all. He glanced through the glass door at the people. His eyes were focusing perfectly, he noted, which meant that he was sober. And that was a little surprising. After all, he'd had quite a bit, and all of it on an empty stomach.

Ann's voice came on, sounding a little thick, he decided.

"I'm down in the Village," he told her. "Can you talk?"

"Certainly I can talk, darling. Are you coming over?"

"Is it all right? I mean, what about your friend?"

She laughed. "Don't worry about him. He's a buyer, and some salesmen just took him out on the town. I don't know when he'll be back, but it won't be soon."

"All right," Jeff said. "What's the room number?"

She told him and he hung up and walked outside to find a taxi.

Ann Lynch's suite at the Glencannon was everything Jeff had expected it to be, and more. She showed him through it proudly.

"It's a slight improvement on that furnished room I had on Flower Street in King City, isn't it?" she laughed. "Here. Let me take your coat. And loosen your tie."

He wasn't the only one who had spent the afternoon drinking, Jeff discovered. It showed not so much in her voice as it did in the exaggerated casualness with which she helped him out of his coat and tried to undo the knot in his tie. And when he followed her

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back to the living room, he noticed that she teetered ever so slightly on her four-inch heels.

She wheeled a bar-cart over to the sofa and sat down and patted the cushion beside her.

He sat down and watched her making drinks and said, "How's our friend Nadine?"

"Please! Spending the whole afternoon with her was bad enough. I just got back, as a matter of fact. Haven't even had time to shower and change."

"Are we going some place?"

She handed him a drink that was mostly whiskey and shook her head. "No. Not unless you want to." She clicked her glass against his and smiled at him through her lashes. "Why go out? We've got everything we want, right here."

"That's so true," he said. He sampled the drink. It was as smooth as moonlight. He drank half of it and put the glass down on top of the bar-cart. "Well, Ann—are we ready to talk about things?"

She shut her eyes and raised her glass. When she opened her eyes again and put the glass down, it was empty. "Wonderful stuff," she murmured. "How I needed that." She reached out and turned on the bar-cart's radio. It blared suddenly, and she cursed and turned the volume down to a whisper. Dance music came out, soft and slow, and to Jeff it seemed that it had the quality music has when it comes across water. He didn't know how she had managed it, but now her thigh was pressing his, exactly as it had earlier in the bar.

"We've got hours and hours, Jeff," she said softly. "Let's not talk about *that* just yet. Would you like to dance?"

"No. Listen, Ann. I . . ."

"Finish your drink, darling. You're way behind."

She leaned forward to make herself another drink. She was wearing the same dress she had worn at the Brick Yard, a blue and white jersey print, very low-cut and tight-waisted. It hugged her body like a second skin.

Jeff shifted his glass to the other hand and swirled the ice cube around in it. "I don't want to rush you, Ann," he said, "but the factor of time can be pretty important in a case like this. Have you changed your mind about Piggy, or what?"

"*Must* we talk about him? Now?"

"We'll have to, sooner or later. And like I said, the sooner the better."

She leaned back against the cushion and smiled at him. "I haven't

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changed my mind, Jeff. I couldn't—because I haven't even made it up yet. You know how it is with women . . ."

"Don't you think ten thousand is enough?"

She nodded. "It's enough." Then, "Jeff, darling, I have news for you. Ten *cents* would be enough. After what he did."

Things were going better now. Jeff relaxed a little.

"He gave you the brush?" he asked.

"Yes. A big, nasty brush." Her voice was suddenly bitter. "For a *cootch dancer!* Can you imagine?"

Jeff shook his head and raised his glass again. He'd have to go easy on this stuff. Lately, whiskey had had a way of slipping up on him. He drank sparingly and put the glass down again. Nothing to do but sweat it out. Ann had all the cards, and if she wanted to play them slowly, well, then she was going to play them slowly —and there was nothing he could do about it.

Beside him, Ann drank slowly and steadily, humming now and then with the music from the radio. The minutes dragged by, and the silence stirred his unrest. He felt the irritation building inside him and he cursed her silently for wasting time like this. She was doing this deliberately, he knew, enjoying the power she held, extracting pleasure from baiting him and withholding information from him. When it pleased her, she would talk—and not before.

He got up and, carrying his glass, walked to the window and looked down into Central Park West. The cacophony of auto horns came to him dimly, reminding him oddly of the times he had brought Marcia to New York. Things had been so simple then, the future so clear. . . . He took two long swallows of his drink—and now he realized with numbing suddenness that he was drunk. Not just a little tight. Really *drunk*. It hadn't slipped up on him; he knew now that he'd been pretty far gone ever since he'd called Ann from the Village. He'd just *thought* he was sober.

Behind him Ann's voice said, "Nadine just whetted my appetite, Jeff, darling . . ."

He turned to face her. What kind of woman *was* she, anyhow?

Her smile was heavy-lidded, her lips bright and moist looking. "Can you guess what I *really* want, Jeff?"

"I haven't given it a lot of thought," he muttered. He put his glass down on the window sill.

Still smiling, her eyes never leaving his for an instant, she twisted her body and lay back flat on the cushions. Very slowly, she reached down and drew the hem of her dress up around her waist.

"This is what I want," she said huskily.

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He stared at her, at the red-gold of her hair and the smoldering eyes. He took a step toward her, then another. It seemed as if he were floating, as if he weren't actually *walking* at all. He stood beside the sofa now, looking down at her, watching the wisps of red fog swirling across her. Pretty soon the fog would be too dense. He'd have to hurry.

She was breathing heavily. "What are you waiting for?"

She was squirming a little on the cushions, he saw. Maybe Leda thought she was going to get away. He smiled and leaned down toward her. She was wrong. She wasn't going to get away. Leda was smart, and she'd gotten away before. But not this time.

"Jeff!" he heard Leda gasp. "Jeff, what are you . . ."

And then he couldn't hear her voice at all. He could feel her throat pulsing in his hands, though, and it was a good feeling. And even when the fog grew as red and thick as blood, he could still feel her struggling down there beneath him.

It was in September, on the first day of school, and all the other children on the block were at school right now. But he was too little yet. He'd have to wait a few more years, Mother had said, and then he would be old enough and he could go to school like everybody else.

He'd played by himself all day, sitting cross-legged in the short, cool grass on the shady side of the house, making windmills and bridges and boxcars with the Erector Set that Daddy had bought him.

Through the open dining room window he could hear the sound of Leda's vacuum cleaner. Now and then Leda and his mother would say something to each other.

And then all at once he heard his mother's voice rise angrily, as if she were very mad at Leda, and he got up and walked to the window and peeked over the sill.

He'd never seen his mother look that way before. Her face was all twisted so that she wasn't pretty any more. And Leda's face was twisted, too, and awfully white.

"You little bitch!" he heard his mother say. "Right in my home. *Right in my own home!*"

Leda's face was still twisted, but now she was sort of laughing, too. "So you know," she said. "Why don't you ask me how long it's been going on?"

"You little bitch!" his mother said again.

"I'll tell you anyhow," Leda said. "It's been going on a long time. For *months!*"

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His mother took a step toward Leda, and Jeffrey saw that she was starting to cry. "Get out!" his mother said. "Get out of this house!"

"Sure," Leda said. "Sure thing, Mrs. Stoner. But not until I tell you what I think of people like you. You and your snot-nosed brat and your uppish ways! You worked me like a horse and paid me peanuts, and went around with your nose up in the air like you was so much better than anybody else . . ."

"Get *out!*" his mother said.

"Ask your husband who's better. Ask him who he'd rather sleep with!"

"You . . ." his mother said, and Jeff saw that her face was even whiter than Leda's.

"Now you know he's lost interest in you. Now you know why it didn't do any good when you got worried and bought that sexy nightgown and stunk yourself up with perfume. Maybe you think I didn't laugh when he told me about *that!*"

And now it was Leda who took a step forward. She was going to hurt his mother, Jeff knew, and he ran around the house as fast as he could and yanked open the screen door and ran into the living room and kicked at Leda's ankle.

He didn't see her hand coming toward him, but he felt it hit him on the side of the face, and then the room spun around and he was sitting on the floor trying to keep from crying.

His mother made some kind of a noise in her throat and started for Leda, but Leda laughed again and balled her hand up into a fist, just like a man would do, and hit his mother right on the mouth. His mother looked surprised a moment, and then she sat down real quick on a chair, and all at once there was blood on her mouth and on her chin, and some of it dripped down on the front of her dress and made big dark splotches.

He got up and ran toward Leda and kicked at her again, but she caught him by the hair and flung him half way across the room. He wanted to try to kick her again but his knee hurt and he couldn't get up.

It scared him to see Leda's eyes so dark and mean like that. He started to whimper.

Leda ran out of the room and through the living room and up the front stairs. Pretty soon his mother got up and went out to the kitchen and started running water in the sink. He trotted out after her and stood silently while he watched her wipe the blood from her face. She didn't look mad any more. She just looked sick, the way she had that time after Daddy had said there was something wrong with the hamburgers they'd had on the way home from the movie.

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Then there was the sound of Leda's heels coming back down the stairs. He turned and ran into the living room to kick her again. She was carrying her suitcase and a hatbox, and just as he got up to her she pushed the front-door screen open with her shoulder and stepped outside and kicked the screen shut in his face.

She had her mouth all screwed up like she was going to spit right through the screen at him. But she didn't. She just said, "You damn little snot!" and laughed and walked away.

When he went back into the kitchen, his mother was sitting on the high stool she used when she was cooking things, holding a towel to her face. He hugged her around the legs and put his head against her knee. But he didn't cry. He knew it would make her feel *real* bad if he cried.

"Go out and play," his mother said.

He shook his head.

"Please go *outside,* Jeffrey." Then Jeffrey heard the front screen open and shut and his father's heavy steps in the living room.

"Daddy's home!" he cried.

"Yes, dear," his mother said in a funny voice. "Daddy's home." She got up slowly and started toward the living room. But in the doorway she paused and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Go outside and play, Jeffrey. Do you hear?"

She really meant it, he knew. He couldn't get around her this time. He opened the screen and went out on the back porch and sat down on the steps. His knee hurt. It was scraped raw. It was going to form a big scab, he bet. He watched the gas meter man going along from house to house, making marks in his fat black book, until he was out of sight beyond the hedges down the block, and then he went around the house and sat down in the shade and began tearing down the boxcar he had been working on before Leda and his mother had started to yell at each other.

It was funny that Daddy should be home in the middle of the afternoon. He didn't usually come home until almost dinner time. Through the open window he could hear Mother and Daddy talking. There was something awful wrong, he knew, because they didn't sound the way they always did; they sounded almost like two strange grown-ups. And they were talking almost in whispers.

Maybe they were talking that way because they didn't want him to hear them, like they were always spelling out words instead of saying them, because they knew he couldn't spell yet and wouldn't know what they were talking about. He got up and went around to the kitchen steps and climbed up them very quietly, and walked through the house very quietly, and slipped behind the drapes be-

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tween the dining room and living room without Mother and Daddy seeing him. He couldn't see *them*, either, but he could hear what they said.

Daddy's voice sounded tired, and that was funny, because Daddy worked at a desk and was almost never tired. He was always laughing and teasing Mother and saying funny things to everybody.

"It happened, that's all," Daddy said. "I don't know how else to say it, Grace. It just happened."

Jeffrey waited for his mother to say something, but she didn't. And then he strained his ears real hard and he could hear his mother sobbing.

There was a long silence, and then his father said, "I must have gone crazy. I—I don't know . . . Grace, I don't know *what* made me do it. . . ."

"In my house," Mother said, and she was sobbing and talking at the same time. "*In my own home, Walt. In my own bed!* And now you tell me you stole money to spend on her. Walt, how *could* you?"

"I don't know, Grace," Daddy said. "Something came over me. I just went crazy . . ."

"And now you'll go to prison!" Mother said. "Didn't you ever think about what would happen to Jeffrey and me, Walt? Didn't you ever once think of *that*?"

"I told you," Daddy said. "I won't go to prison. I told you Mr. Paxton said he wouldn't prosecute, not if I paid back the money I took."

"You'll go to prison," his mother said. "They'll put you in a cell like a common . . . like a common . . ."

"Grace," Daddy said. "Please try to be reasonable. Mr. Paxton said I could have a whole month to pay the money back."

"But you *can't* pay it back! Walt, where in the world would we get two thousand dollars?" Her voice went up. "Two thousand dollars! And all of it spent on that red headed little trollop! So goody-goody, so sweet to Jeffrey—twitching herself around here, just waiting for me to get out of the house a minute so she could . . ."

"There's only one way out, Grace," Daddy broke in. "We'll have to sell the house."

"Yes," Mother said. "Sell the house. Sell our home and put Jeffrey and your wife right out on the street. Why not? Why should *you* care what happens to us?"

"I'm sorry," Daddy said. "It's the only way. We've paid on it long enough so that I can get back about fifteen hundred dollars. That, and what we can get for the furniture . . ."

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"I won't let you!" his mother cried. "I won't let you!"

"Do you want me to go to jail?"

"No, no, *no!*"

"Grace, please listen to me. I . . ."

Jeff couldn't stand to hear his mother crying like that. He came out from behind the drapes and ran to her. He held his arms up to her and she lifted him and held him hard against her, so tight he could scarcely breathe. He looked into her eyes. She wasn't crying any more—she was looking at Daddy, and her face looked just like it had when Leda hit her.

Then he looked at Daddy, and all at once Daddy started to cry. Not like Mother did. There weren't any tears in his eyes. But he was crying all the same. He'd never seen Daddy do *that* before. Daddy had always said boys and men weren't supposed to cry.

Seeing Daddy cry made Jeff feel like crying too, and he did. He and Daddy cried, but not Mother—Mother just kept holding him real tight against her and staring at Daddy.

Chapter Eleven

A SEA OF sounds was swirling around him. Dixieland blasts hit his ear and he heard many people laughing. A cash register whirred. Words swirling all around him. . . .

Very near to him, a woman's voice said, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He opened his eyes and stared at her. She was a big woman, middle-aged, with washed-out blue eyes and upswept hair as yellow and dry-looking as straw. Her bare arms sagged with fat and there were freckles beneath the powder on the upper slopes of her ponderous breasts. She was fumbling nervously with the diamond brooch on her bosom, looking at Jeff with mingled perplexity and alarm.

"You sick or something?" she asked.

What's happening to me? Jeff thought.

They were at a table jammed up against the front of the bandstand. Just now the trombone player was taking a solo. His brown face glistened with sweat, his eyes screwed shut, cheeks puffed out, as he rode his Dixie kick—a blasting, open horn that hammered against Jeff's brain. His head hurt and his stomach churned with nausea.

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Jeff stared at the fat, blonde woman, moistening his dry lips. Who *was* she? What was he doing with *her?* And just where *was* he, anyhow? He looked down at the table. He was holding a full glass of beer, he discovered. Hell, he was a whiskey man; he *never* drank beer.

"Listen," Jeff said. "Something's happened. I . . ."

"I'll say it has!" the fat blonde said. "For a minute I thought you were going to conk out on me. What's *wrong* with you?"

"Where are we?" Jeff asked. "I mean, what's the name of this place?"

"Penny's," she said. "You suddenly lost your agates?"

"Penny's? On Forty-fifth Street?"

Her small eyes changed subtly. "Is there any other Penny's?"

"Something happened," Jeff said. "When did we—when did I meet you?"

She leaned forward. "That damn trombone! I can't hear you."

"When did I meet you?" he repeated.

"Don't you remember anything?"

He shook his head.

"A blackout, huh?"

"That's it," Jeff said. "A blackout."

She made a clucking sound. "Well, what do you know? I'll bet you don't even remember my name. . . . No? It's Lucille."

"How long have I . . . How long have we been here?"

She studied him carefully, worrying the edge of her lip with her teeth, as if debating whether or not this were all some gigantic gag.

"Please, Lucille," Jeff said. "I'm leveling with you. I don't remember *anything.*"

She shrugged. "All right," she sighed. "So you don't remember." She shook a cigarette from the pack between them and lighted it and let the smoke out slowly. "You want me to take it from the beginning, is that it?"

"Yes," Jeff said.

"All right. I was at the bar when you came in—that was about ten-thirty—and you sat down and we got to talking. You liked the music and just as soon as there was an empty table, you insisted we come back here."

Jeff looked at his watch. It was one o'clock.

"That means I've been here longer than two hours," he said incredulously.

"Sure. And drinking nothing at all. You kept ordering beer, but you never drank any. You just played around with the glass, until

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it got flat, and then ordered some more." She shook her head wonderingly. "Damned if I can understand you."

Jeff said wryly, "That makes two of us. What did I talk about?"

"What did you *talk* about! That's good. You talked about everything under the sun. I never heard any man talk so much."

He hadn't been conscious of it before, but now he realized that he was very weak. For a moment, he wondered if what he thought was weakness might not be drunkenness. But he knew that it was not. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and even then there had been only a couple of eggs. And before that? He couldn't even remember. A man his size *had* to eat, and eat a lot.

It was even an effort to raise his voice above the blare of the Dixieland band. "Lucille," he said, "I'm sorry but I've got to get out of here."

She seemed surprised. "What for? You're all right now."

"No," he said. "I'm not. I've got to get out of here."

"Listen," she said. "You aren't going to walk out on *me* like this. Who the hell do you think you are?"

Jeff put his hands down flat against the top of the table and pushed himself erect. "I wish I knew, Lucille," he said. "How much is the check?"

"It isn't that," she said bitingly. "I don't care about that. They'll just put it on my tab. But you aren't going to . . ."

"I'm sorry," he said again. He turned and started toward the door, wondering if he would make it to the street. His legs dragged as if they had weights chained to them; it was hard to put one foot in front of the other and still keep his balance. Once a girl brushed against him and he thought he was going to lose his balance entirely. Finally, he got to the door and pushed it open somehow and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Across Forty-fifth Street an on-and-off electric sign flashed the word HOTEL.

Sleep. He had to have sleep. He couldn't think—he couldn't do anything—until he had slept. He lurched across the crowded sidewalk to the curb and stood waiting for a break in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, vaguely conscious of the surge of sound and light from Times Square, half a block away. He had eyes for only the cheap hotel sign, and the bed it represented.

A hand took his elbow. Lucille's voice said, "All right, so you *did* have to get out of there. You could at least have waited for me."

Jeff put his hand out against the hood of a car for support. "I've had it," he said. "Sorry, Lucille—but I've got to get some sleep."

"Where?"

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He nodded in the general direction of the hotel. "There. It's as good a place as any. Better—because it's close."

An empty cab crawled by, and suddenly Lucille took his arm and half dragged him into it. Getting in, he almost fell.

"Where are we going?" Jeff asked. Not that he cared. Nothing in the world seemed worth caring about just now.

"To my place," Lucille said. She gave the driver an address on Lexington Avenue.

The jerk and sway of the taxi made Jeff a little dizzy, but he managed to keep his body upright on the seat. He didn't want to think, but in spite of himself his mind kept going back to Ann Lynch. He remembered going to the window of her hotel suite and looking down into Central Park West—and after that there was nothing.

Lucille worked a heavy arm around his neck and drew his head over onto her shoulder. "You aren't just sleepy, honey," she said. "You're weak. I never saw a big man so weak." Her body had a powdery, sweaty scent, but Jeff was too tired to care. "We're going to fix that. Lucille is going to make you strong again." Her thick fingers kneaded the bulge of muscle along his upper arm. "Real fast, honey. *Real* fast."

This is crazy, Jeff thought. Here I am, being treated like a child, going nobody knows where—and the craziest thing of all is that I just don't give a damn.

"How long's it been since you've eaten?" Lucille asked.

Jeff roused himself enough to say, "A long time."

"I knew it! Well, we'll fix that too. You'll see."

And my big chance, Jeff thought. Ann was going to blow the whistle on Piggy—and I had to get plastered. I had to get so stinking drunk that I don't remember anything she said. My one big beautiful chance—and I threw it out the window.

The taxi stopped. Jeff stumbled out and held on to the door while Lucille paid the driver.

Lucille's apartment was small, but it was expensively and tastefully furnished. She led him to the studio couch and threw the back cushions aside. "Here," she said gently. "Lie down. I'll have her over here in a minute."

Jeff lay down and shut his eyes. "Have *who* over here?" he asked.

"My doctor."

Jeff tried to sit up, but she pushed him back down again. "I don't need a doctor," he said. "All I need is some sleep."

"Hush," Lucille told him. "You're going to have a transfusion."

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This time, he did sit up, in spite of her attempt to restrain him. "A what?"

"Transfusion, honey. It's the only way to keep going. I have them all the time. Sometimes I go for days on end without sleeping—but when I'm just about unwound, I call Sadie. A little plasma and—bang!—I'm ready to do the town all over again."

"I haven't got that kind of money," Jeff said. "And even if I did have, I . . ."

"Shhhh!" she whispered. "I'm going to call her now."

He lay back. There was no point in arguing with her. He'd lie here and rest a few minutes. Then, when this Sadie person came, he'd say, no thanks, he wasn't having any. Very simple.

But, sometime later, when he opened his eyes again, he found his coat had been removed, his sleeve rolled up, and a white gauze bandage wound around his left arm. Lucille was standing beside the couch, smiling down at him.

He swung his legs over the side of the couch and sat up—and suddenly he realized that he felt exactly as if he had slept for a week and had eaten at least two pounds of rare beefsteak. Gone was the weakness and the nausea and the aching muscles. New life surged inside him. He felt ready for anything.

He looked at Lucille and grinned. "So you did it anyway."

"Feel better, honey?" she asked.

"Yes," Jeff said. "Like new."

"Nothing like it," she said. "Works like a charm. You'd be surprised how much more living you can get done this way. A charge of plasma now and then, and you can live two lifetimes in one."

"I see what you mean," Jeff said. He sat up and flexed his arms and moved his legs. It was wonderful to feel alive again.

"Thanks a lot, Lucille," he said. "I'm very grateful."

"Forget it," she said. "How would you like to have a drink?"

"Not right now," Jeff laughed. He stood up and glanced around the apartment. Through a half open door he saw the gleam of white enamel and walked toward it. "Back in a minute," he said.

She giggled. "Take your time, honey. Maybe when you come back I'll have a surprise for you."

He paused. "A surprise?"

She laughed. "Just you go on in there. And take your time. Give me a few minutes, anyhow."

He laughed politely, without having any idea what there was to laugh at, and crossed to the bathroom. He took his time. He leaned up against the tile wall and thought very hard. But there was no use. He could not remember Ann having said anything that would

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help him find Piggy. Ann hadn't even wanted to talk about Piggy at all. His trip to New York had been for nothing. And this black-out business was getting serious. He'd have to see a doctor, maybe even go to a psychiatrist, the way George Bishop was always urging him to do.

Liquor had once been a big problem, but that was before he met Marcia. Since then, he'd been able to keep his drinking on a leash. And he'd have to learn how to do it again. There were drugs to help you along.

He snapped off the bathroom light and opened the door. The living room was empty. Lucille must have gone into the bedroom. He started to sit back down on the studio couch.

"Honey," Lucille's voice called. "I'm in here."

He glanced toward the bedroom door. It was ajar, and he could see that the room was in semi-darkness. He got up and walked to the door. For a long moment he could distinguish only the objects nearest him—the foot of the bed, a vanity bench, a French doll.

And then, from the bed, Lucille giggled again. "Over here, honey!"

He saw her then, not all at once, but as a great white blob that slowly took form there in the middle of the bed.

For a long moment he stood quite still. He should have figured on something like this. Nothing in the world was for free—not even blood.

She shifted her weight on the bed and the sagging mattress groaned beneath her. "Honey . . ."

Jeff turned and walked rapidly to the front door. Just as his hand reached the knob, he heard the pound of heavy bare feet across the floor behind him.

He didn't look back at her; he could not.

"You bastard!" she grated. "I paid for it and I'm going to get it!"

Jeff opened the door, but her hands were clawing at his shoulders now, trying to turn him around toward her.

He reached up and pushed her hands away and stepped through the doorway.

"You bastard!" she cried. "You damn, cheap bastard! Come back here!"

He slammed the door shut behind him and walked down the corridor toward the stairs.

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Chapter Twelve

IT WAS almost six o'clock when Jeff left Lucille's apartment house that morning and turned south on Lexington.

He felt hungry for the first time in days. Another block brought him to the Early Bird Waffle Shop and he went inside and ordered scrambled eggs and ham and potatoes. Then he went back to the men's room at the rear to wash up. He ran the basin full of cold water and bathed his face in it until his skin was chilled and then he scrubbed his hands and dried them slowly on the roller towel. He forced himself to move slowly and deliberately, to make a ritual of these simple, familiar acts. There was too much tension in him, too much impatience. He had to get a firmer grip on himself.

You couldn't let your mind run away from you. If you did, you lost perspective. You began to magnify certain things and lose sight of others. And that's when you really began to foul yourself up. He wasn't whipped yet, not by a damned sight. He had failed to find Piggy. He had even failed to elicit any information from Piggy's ex-mistress. But that was the way the cards fell sometimes. This was police work, and police work was seldom a matter of inspiration. You ran down one clue, one lead after another. Eventually, if you were lucky, you hit the right one—and there you were. In the meantime, you kept your patience—and your head.

A squat man in a pin-stripe suit and Homburg came into the men's room. He tucked a briefcase beneath his arm while he dampened his hands and dried them. He nodded at Jeff and went out again.

And suddenly Jeff remembered his own briefcase, the one he had had with him when he boarded the train for New York. He didn't have it now, and he hadn't thought of it once since he left the train. Had he left it in the coach? He must have. Damn! Another instance of the absent-mindedness that was becoming a pattern with him. He'd have to tighten up.

He straightened his tie. His fingernails were dirty, he noticed, even after the scrubbing he'd given his hands. He looked at them more closely, frowning. Beneath the nails were thin crescents of some reddish-brown substance.

It looked like blood. But it couldn't be. He hadn't been around

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any blood, and he hadn't been in any fight. Even if he had tangled with someone, he would hardly have resorted to *scratching*.

Hell, it could be anything. He took his knife from his pocket and cleaned the nails and washed his hands again and went outside to his breakfast.

He ate as rapidly as he could, his mind busy planning what to do next. Should he talk to Ann Lynch again? She might talk to him, and she might not. There was one fast way to find out. He had a second cup of coffee and then stepped into the phone booth and called her suite.

He heard the phone being lifted off the hook. There was a subdued murmur of voices—all male—and then a moment of absolute silence. Then a man's voice answered. A very young voice and very pleasant. "Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to Ann," Jeff said.

"Who's calling?" the other man said. His voice fairly bubbled with good humor.

Jeff felt his hand tightening on the receiver. There was something very wrong here. No man's voice had a right to sound that cheerful at this hour of the morning. No sober voice, anyhow. And this voice was sober. Sober, and friendly, and yet so charged with intenseness that it almost crackled—filled with the kind of good humor that could be nothing but phony.

It was, in short, exactly the same kind of voice Jeff himself had used on occasions when he was anxious to learn the identity of some unknown caller.

He remembered the times he had sat around in apartments and cheap hall bedrooms and mansions, waiting for the phone to ring, while around him the lab men worked with their chalk and tape measures, their flash bulbs and fingerprint powder. You waited because the murderer might call—to see if his crime had been discovered.

There were thousands, not hundreds of policemen in New York. No one of them could possibly know all the others.

Gruffly, Jeff said, "This is Lieutenant Sabin . . ."

The young voice on the other end of the line lost its pleasantness. It became icily efficient. "Yes, Sabin . . . ?"

Jeff put the receiver back on its hook, very slowly, and stared at the rectangular black instrument a long moment. Then he walked back to the counter, paid for his breakfast and went outside. He felt numbed, too numbed to think. There were cops in Ann Lynch's hotel suite . . . that was certain. But why? What had happened there since he had left?

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He hailed a cab. No matter what the trouble was, he couldn't afford to become involved in it. He had his own troubles, and a lot of them. And he had to think. Now that he couldn't see Ann, he had to come up with something else. There was a place in Greenwich Village, an early morning hang-out for the show crowd, where a man could have a drink and think. When it came to hard, straight thinking, he had to have people around him. Not people to talk to, or look at, but just people around him talking and moving—to keep his mind thinking in *terms* of people. Otherwise, he went off on one tangent after another. Some cops were like that, and most newspapermen. And thinking of newspapermen reminded him of Harry Sybert, the King City sadist who had sworn to outpolice the police.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"The Village," Jeff said. "Washington Mews."

At Washington Mews, Jeff paid the driver, tipped him, and walked a block and a half to the Rebound Club. It was another cellar place, even less impressive than the ones on either side of it.

But it was doing a rush business, and there was the noise that Jeff had wanted. He took a table in the rear, next to the deserted bandstand, and ordered bourbon and water. When his drink came, he sat sipping it slowly, trying to get his thoughts into some semblance of order.

Beside him a girl's voice said, "*Hello,* Ralph! I thought you were in Philly!"

He looked up at her. She was young, eighteen or nineteen, a lush, lacquered blonde with more than her share of liquor aboard. She teetered uncertainly on her high heels, smiling at him, gamin-like, from beneath her stage eyelashes.

"Wrong guy," Jeff said.

She slid into his lap and planted a long, noisy kiss on his cheek. Jeff tried to free himself, but her arms came up around his neck and she snuggled closer.

"Honey," she said, "you know something? You need a shave."

"Sure," Jeff grinned. "Now, go on back to the Copa, or wherever you came from."

"You aren't *really* Ralph, are you? You just look like him, don't you? And you've got an awful beard, haven't you?"

Jeff sighed and brought his hand up to push her away. His fingers closed around the soft, warm flesh of her upper arm, just beneath the shoulder.

And at the same instant Jeff touched her, something suddenly burst inside his brain. Something caused by the feel of warm girl-

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flesh in his fingers, the girl-scent that filled his nostrils, the girl's surprised gasp when his fingers involuntarily tightened enough to cause her pain. A dark curtain lifted, and now Jeff knew with abrupt and consummate horror how he had gotten those red-brown crescents beneath his fingernails. He knew why there had been police in Ann Lynch's hotel suite. The mental blocks were gone: the dark curtain has risen, and now he remembered everything. Every tiny detail.

He could remember exactly how he had killed Ann Lynch.

The blonde knocked his hand away and struggled off his lap.

"What's the *matter* with you, anyhow? You crazy or something?" She backed cautiously away from him, her eyes wide with fright.

He had killed Ann Lynch. . . .

He wanted to scream.

The scene in Ann's hotel suite was vivid now, racing through his brain like an accelerated movie. He was walking toward her. He was bending over her. He had her throat in his hands. She was fighting him. But he was choking her, and he would show no mercy. She had to be punished. He ground his thumbs deep into her windpipe. . . .

His whole body was trembling. He could feel the sweat breaking out along his ribs and under his arms.

A hundred voices hammered at him: Murderer! Murderer!

It was an effort to breath, to draw air down into his lungs.

And suddenly, with another part of his mind, he knew that his life had divided into two distinct parts. There was whatever his life had been before this moment—and there was *now,* and whatever would come after.

Panic fought upward inside him. And fear. Cold, helpless fear.

Why? Why had he killed her? She had done nothing to him.

He got up from the table and lurched toward the men's room where he was sick to his stomach. For minutes after the retching stopped, he stayed where he was, while once again his mind moved through the act of murder.

And suddenly the memory blurred and became abruptly another night and another girl.

It became Connie Knight's apartment and Connie's throat in his hands and Connie's eyes pleading with him while her face darkened and her tongue pushed through her lips.

He had killed Connie Knight too, he knew now. He had killed her in exactly the same way he had killed Ann Lynch—and for exactly the same reason.

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Because he thought she had to be punished. . . .

But—punished for what?

Crazy! the voices screamed. *Crazy!*

He sloshed cold water against his face. If only he could stop those voices! If only he could stop the panicked hammering of his heart against his ribs!

He stood with his hand on the handle of the door for almost a full minute before he felt reasonably sure he could make it to the street, and then he walked slowly and determinedly through the scattering of tables.

"That's him!" a girl's voice said somewhere near him. He glanced in her direction. It was the blonde, still frightened, sitting with two other girls and two men. He looked away from her and caught the handrail by the steps and hauled himself up to the street door.

The street was bright now. Nothing looked the same, or sounded the same. Even the sidewalk beneath his feet felt different somehow. He had gone into the Rebound Club a manhunter—and had come out a murderer.

He walked all the way to Grand Central Station. And by the time he reached it, he had come to accept the fact that he was a killer. The hardest thing to accept was that he had been another person for some time now—without realizing it.

And there were no reasons. Nothing but the knowledge that he had killed and that now he was the hunted instead of the hunter. The panic had left him, but the fear was there—and the fear would never leave. There was guilt and remorse, too, but the fear was stronger.

He went down the steps to the waiting room and bought a tabloid. The headline took up the entire upper half of the front page. He sat down and read the story. Then he folded the paper, slipped it into his pocket. He stared across the huge room, and thought of Marcia.

It was going to be hell for her. They would get him, of course. It was just a matter of time. But somehow, that didn't seem so important. It was what it would do to Marcia that twisted him inside.

He forced himself to think back very carefully, to everything he had done since he arrived in New York, to everyone he had seen and talked to. There was, so far as he could tell, only one person who could definitely tie him to Ann Lynch. That person was Ann's lesbian friend, Nadine. And Nadine certainly would remember him. She had been angry and jealous, and he'd made a deep and negative impression on her. The question was, could she give the New York

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cops enough to go on? She'd try, certainly, because she'd want to get back at him. And there was no question about the cops going to Nadine. They'd check Ann's every move during yesterday afternoon and evening. Nadine had been next to the last person to see Ann alive, except for cab drivers and elevator operators and the like, and the chances were that the police already had questioned her.

He thought a moment of Courtney Wolfe, and wondered how many people were going to be hurt besides Courtney. Courtney had a wife somewhere, and children, and a lot of good friends. He had come home at midnight, the tabloids said. There had been friends with him then, too, and they had discovered Ann's body. This gave Courtney an alibi for the police, but not for his wife and children.

The announcer called a west-bound train and Jeff stirred and reached into his wallet for the return half of his ticket. He held it between his fingers a moment, rubbing the sharp edge against his thumb.

Had he been kidding himself? Had he really thought it would be as simple as this? Just get on a train and go back to King City? Across the waiting room he saw a cop, neat and straight and business-like in his blue uniform.

Jeff got to his feet slowly and started walking toward him. It was only a matter of time. Hours, perhaps. This way there'd be no waiting. You walked up to the cop and told him you'd killed a girl. Two girls. And then it was all over. All over—except waiting for them to kill *you*.

He walked faster. He was only a few yards from the cop.

Jeff stared at him, at the freshly pressed uniform and the bright shield and the face that was smiling now but could be instantly hard. He couldn't say anything.

"Something I can do for you?" the cop asked.

Jeff ran his tongue across his lips. They felt rough and thick and immense.

The cop's smile faded a little. "Something wrong, fella?"

Jeff shook his head. "No. Nothing's wrong."

The cop looked at him curiously, rocking slightly on his heels, his body very straight and tall. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Jeff said. "I'm sure." He turned and walked toward the west gates again. It was one thing to know you should give yourself up, to want to give yourself up—but it was something else again to go through with it.

It was somehow like standing on a bridge and deciding to jump. You prepared—but when the instant came to kill yourself, you couldn't.

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And turning himself over to that cop would have been a form of suicide. A slow form of it—but just as certain as any other.

As he walked through the gate and down the stairs to his train, Jeff knew he *never* could go through with it. He couldn't give himself up.

He found a coach seat to himself, and as the train pulled out of the station a bit of insight came to him, cold, clear, and final. He had killed twice—and before he let them get him for those murders, he would kill again.

He was sick with remorse and fear and the knowledge of what he was and what he had done.

But he would kill the first man who tried to take him.

Chapter Thirteen

JEFF'S TRAIN pulled into the King City station at 12:41. He climbed the stairs to the waiting room two at a time and half ran across it and out to the street where he had left his Plymouth. If he hurried, he could be waiting for Marcia when she left the record shop for lunch at one o'clock.

He felt he had to see her. Never before had he felt this urgent need to see her and talk to her. True, he couldn't tell her that she was engaged to a two-time killer, that there wasn't too much time left for them, and that they'd better make the most of it. He couldn't for an instant do or say anything that might give her a hint that everything was not as it should be. No. Somehow—though it was going to be tough—he had to concentrate on making her think that everything was going to be all right. It was the least he could do for her. She would never be the same again, once she knew what had happened. Until then, though, he could make things as bright for her as he could.

He jockeyed the Plymouth through the midday traffic, caught more green lights than red, and pulled up in front of the record shop just as Marcia came out and crossed the sidewalk toward a car parked at the curb. It was George Bishop's car, he saw, and Jeff blew his horn. But before he could get out and run up to the other car, it pulled away.

Jeff cursed softly and followed it. He'd wanted to see George, too, but not just now. Right now he wanted to see Marcia alone. At the

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next intersection he pulled up alongside George's car and sounded the horn again. George glanced at him, looked away for a second, then did a double-take and his lips spread in a grin.

"Pull over," Jeff yelled. "I've caught you in the act." He hoped he'd got just the right tone of banter into his voice, and from the way George looked back at him in mock fear, he guessed he had. From now on, he knew, everything would be an act. He had to be exactly as he had been before, except that he wanted to be a little less grim and intense.

Half way down the next block, George pulled over and Jeff curbed the Plymouth behind George's car and got out. Marcia opened the door of George's car for him and he got in beside her and closed the door, sitting a little sideways so that his bulky shoulders didn't crowd the seat too much.

"Fine thing," he said. "I leave town for a few hours, and the first thing that happens is my girl and my best friend start carrying on together."

Marcia laughed. "We had a date for lunch yesterday," she said. "But I had to stand George up."

"You look awful," George said. "You'll shame us both."

"Where are we going?" Jeff asked. "I'm hungry." So far, so good, he thought. Maybe this wasn't going to be so hard after all.

Marcia was still smiling, but he could seen the concern deep beneath the laughter in her eyes.

"We thought we'd have lunch out on the highway," she said lightly. "There's a new steak place George was telling me about."

"Fine," Jeff said.

They rode in silence for a moment, and then Marcia worked her hand into his. "Well . . . ?" she said.

"You mean how'd I make out?"

She nodded.

He watched the oncoming stream of traffic. "I'm not sure. Pretty good, I think. I'll know more about it later."

"That's pretty cryptic," George said. "You want to elaborate a little, or are we supposed to stay in the dark?"

"For a while," Jeff said. "I know more than I understand—if that makes sense."

"It doesn't," Marcia said, and George laughed.

In the rear-view mirror, Jeff saw George glance quickly at Marcia, and then back at the road. He had to change the subject, and change it fast. "Anything happen while I was gone?" he asked.

Marcia shook her head. "Except that Gil Phelps called me again.

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I hung up on him. Oh, yes . . . someone else called me. A reporter from the paper. Harry Sybert, I think he said his name was."

"What'd he want?"

"That was this morning, about ten o'clock. He wanted to know if I'd seen you. He said he wanted to talk to you."

"And?"

"I told him he could find your number in the phone book. He was just starting to get nasty about it, and then a customer came in. I hung up on him, too."

"There's the place," George said. He turned the car off the highway onto a broad sweep of gravel and pulled up before a roadside restaurant.

When they had found a booth and ordered three steak dinners, and a beer apiece, George walked over to the jukebox and selected a quarter's worth of recordings. Marcia sat quietly beside Jeff, apparently preoccupied with her own thoughts. George came back to the booth, grinned at Jeff, and busied himself making interlocking wet rings on the table with the bottom of his beer glass.

There was something wrong here, Jeff knew. Something too strained and self-conscious to be present among three good friends. Suddenly it occurred to him that possibly he was not the only one who was acting. George was normally solemn, never given to grnning like an ape like this and making small talk just for the hell of it. And Marcia, too, was acting strangely. She was usually talkative —sometimes almost too talkative—but today she was thinking a lot, but talking not at all.

He glanced at the big fingers around his beer glass. He was gripping the glass so hard that his fingers were flattened slightly.

He was as taut as the head on a snare drum. And then he saw that Marcia's hand was trembling a little as she lifted her glass to her lips. He looked at George. On George's forehead a sheen of sweat had formed—and this restaurant was air-conditioned.

He took a sip of his beer and put the glass down carefully. What was going on here? He felt like an outsider. They were keeping something from him.

The first of George's recordings started to play, a frenetic piano chorus that clawed at Jeff's raw nerves. Odd, for George to play something like that. George had good taste in jazz.

"George," he said softly, "let's have it?"

George's eyebrows went up. "Have what?"

"Something's simmering between you two," Jeff said. "I know. I can feel it."

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George glanced at Marcia and winked. "The jig's up, honey," he said. "Jeff finally tumbled."

"It was just a matter of time, anyhow," Marcia smiled. "We didn't know how to tell you."

"Quit clowning," Jeff said. "Let me in on this."

George wet his lips. His uncertain smile faded away altogether.

"I don't know what you're getting at," he said. "Unless it's just that I know you don't want to talk about—about what's happened, and so I've been trying to talk around it, sort of."

"It's not that," Jeff said. "You two are holding something out on me."

"Jeff!" Marcia whispered. "You're talking awfully loud."

He looked at her. "What is it, Marcia? What goes with you and George?"

Her eyes held his a moment, then lowered to her glass.

"Nothing," she said quietly. "Absolutely nothing, Jeff. George and I were a little worried about you, that's all. We thought that if we had a talk maybe we could—"

"Straighten me out? Is that it?"

"Well, yes. We—"

"And that's absolutely nothing?"

"Jeff, please."

The blare of the jukebox seemed deafening. Jeff twisted around in the booth and glared at the bartender. "Turn that down!" he yelled.

He heard George's quick intake of breath.

"It's driving me nuts," he said. "It's enough to break your eardrums."

George wasn't looking at him; he was looking at Marcia, and he looked embarrassed. "You shouldn't let a little thing like that throw you, Jeff," he said.

Jeff took a deep breath and held it. Next thing he knew, he'd be flying off in little pieces. There was something building inside him, something as indescribable as it was senseless. He knew he was being an ass, that he was behaving like a child—and yet he seemed powerless to help himself. It was a delayed reaction to everything that had happened since that horrible time at Headquarters when he'd tried to strangle Connie Knight.

He let his breath out slowly and pushed his feet down hard against the floor. He had to act rationally; he had to. He had to get his nerves together.

He heard words, and realized they were his own, and yet they

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were spilling out of him without thought and intent on his part. I was like listening to someone else talking.

"How long have you two been dating each other?" he heard himself saying. "How many times have you had these cozy little chats about me—when I haven't been around?" He looked at George, and hunched a little closer to him across the table. "How long, George?"

George Bishop's damp face was suddenly without color. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly, then narrowed and stayed fixed on the knot in Jeff's tie. He said nothing.

Marcia's fingers came up to touch Jeff's arm. "Darling, you—"

It was as if something vicious inside him had to come out whether he willed it or not.

"All right," he said bitterly. "Maybe you'll tell me."

Then she, too, fell silent.

Jeff felt the pressure inside him mounting. He got to his feet abruptly. "I'm going to have a drink," he said. "And I'm not waiting for the girl to bring it."

George started to get up too. "I'll go with you," he said. "How about you, Marcia?"

"You two stay here," Jeff said. "I'll just be a minute."

He stalked across to the bar and said, "Double shot of whiskey."

"Bourbon, sir?" the bartender asked.

"Hell yes! Bourbon. What'd you think?"

"Sorry, sir," the bartender said. There was something like resigned hatred in his eyes as he lifted a bottle and poured Jeff's drink. Jeff downed it, had another, and then went back to the booth. If he could just hang together until the whiskey took hold, he'd be all right.

But Marcia and George were on their feet, waiting for him. As he came up to them, Marcia turned away from him and started walking toward the door. George glanced at him, put a bill on the table and worked a thin, vague smile onto his face.

"Now what?" Jeff asked.

George shrugged. "Seems like we didn't want those steaks after all, doesn't it?" He took a tentative step toward the door. "Maybe we'd better be getting back, eh, Jeff?"

"You go ahead," Jeff said. "I think I'll hang around a while."

"You haven't got your car."

"I'll call a cab."

George's eyes were careful. "And Marcia?"

"You seem to be doing all right."

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"Jeff, you're acting like a spoiled brat. What the hell's come over you?"

Jeff looked at George a long moment. He heard the door open and the click of Marcia's heels as she stepped onto the walk outside. "I'll see you, George," he said acidly. "Have fun." Somewhere inside him there was this venom that had erupted, and he was powerless to suppress it.

"All right, Jeff," George said tonelessly. "Phone me later on."

"I'll do that," Jeff said. "I'll sure as hell do that."

He watched George as he walked toward his car, and then he turned and went back to the bar and ordered another double. Except for a young couple at the far end and the bartender, who eyed him sullenly, he had the bar to himself. He drank his whiskey in small sips, with several minutes between them. He needed the whiskey, to tie himself together, but he wanted no more blackouts. He spent almost twenty minutes over the drink, and then he went to the phone booth and called a cab.

When they reached the place where he had left the Plymouth, he paid the driver, got behind the wheel, and drove straight to his apartment house. Another shot of whiskey and a half hour in a hot tub would help the reknitting process more than anything else. Once he got himself completely together, he could start thinking of ways to undo the damage he had done himself with Marcia and George. What a crazy damn thing to do. To hurt them like that—to know what you were doing and yet do it anyway.

He parked the Plymouth and got out and started toward the entrance of his apartment house.

On next to the bottom step, smoking a cigarette and smiling at him with thin, colorless lips, sat Harry Sybert.

Chapter Fourteen

SYBERT TOSSED his cigarette away and rose to meet him. He was still wearing the pale blue shirt he had worn the last time Jeff saw him, or one exactly like it, and once again it was dark with sweat. There was an uneven, dirty white line of salt all the way around the collar, and, as Jeff came close, he could smell him.

"It's about time," Sybert said, and laughed that ridiculous, almost feminine laugh of his.

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Jeff started to walk around him, but Sybert moved sideways and stood squarely in his way. Jeff stopped dead, taken completely by surprise. He was a big man; people didn't often block his way like this. Especially sickly looking characters who weighed a hundred pounds less than he, and were, apparently, cold sober. He looked down at the reporter, breathing through his mouth to avoid the smell of him.

"Move," he said softly.

Sybert shook his head slowly. "Want to talk to you. I just came down from your apartment. Makes the second time I've been here today."

"That's tough," Jeff said. Once again he tried to move around the reporter, and once again Sybert stepped in front of him.

"Sybert," Jeff said, "you've picked a bad time to press your luck. Get out of my way before I kick you across the street."

Sybert hesitated, then shrugged and moved six inches to one side. Jeff stepped past him and started through the foyer. Sybert kept pace with him.

"I called you last night," Sybert said. "About eight times. You weren't home. Not all night. I know, because I called every couple of hours."

"So?"

"So—where were you?"

They were at the elevator. Jeff pushed the button and turned slowly to face the scrawny little reporter. "Listen," he said. "I don't know what you're after, or what the hell's eating you, or anything else about you. But I wish to hell you'd stop sticking your nose in my affairs."

Sybert put up a grimy hand and tugged at his broken nose.

"I was just wondering if you felt like talking yet."

"About what?"

"About the reason you manhandled Connie Knight. Lots of people are getting more curious than ever about that, Stoner. And me, you might say I'm the most curious of them all."

Jeff studied him. "And that's all you want to know?"

Sybert shook his head. "Not by a damn sight. It'll do for a start, but it isn't the reason I kept calling you all night."

"You know something?" Jeff asked. "I think you'd better drag on out of here. I don't like the way you look, and I don't like the way you smell. Turn around, and keep walking, and don't come back."

The elevator doors slid open. It was empty. The operator looked questioningly at Jeff and Sybert. "Up?"

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Jeff started to get in, but Sybert's hand caught at his arm. "I got your girl friend's number from a pal of mine," he said, his voice a sibilant whisper. "But I didn't get it till this morning. Next time I want to call you at four o'clock in the morning, I'll know where I can reach you, huh?" His wide mouth twisted in a leer, and he made a soft sound in his throat. "Pretty nice, Stoner. I wouldn't mind shacking up with that, myself."

Jeff hit him. A split instant before his fist would have smashed against Sybert's receding chin, Jeff opened his hand, and slapped him instead. Even so, the blow sent Sybert reeling backward. He lost his balance and sprawled headlong on the floor.

The elevator operator's eyes bulged.

Sybert raised himself to one elbow. There was a pink bubble at one side of his mouth. His face was as white as death. His mouth worked a moment, and then he spat out a stream of bloody spittle and smiled up at Jeff. "You fooled me," he said. To Jeff Stoner, it seemed that Sybert was on the verge of laughter, that he was having all he could do to keep from laughing out loud. "Yeah," the reporter said. "You fooled me. I didn't think you had the guts."

There was no remorse or pity in Jeff; he regretted only that he hadn't done this the first time Sybert had tried to take advantage of the immunity he'd imagined his small body entitled him to.

He stepped into the elevator. The operator closed the doors and turned to look at him. "He was just a *little* guy . . ." he said tautly. "Pretty little for you, Mr. Stoner."

"You only know what you saw," Jeff said. "Don't be judging me, friend. I'd hate to have to teach you better."

The operator glared at him, muttered something under his breath, and when he arrived at Jeff's floor, he stopped the elevator with such suddenness that Jeff lurched half way across the car. But he didn't make an issue of it: he had trouble enough already.

He left the elevator and walked rapidly along the corridor, and just as he put his key in the lock of his door he heard the telephone in his apartment begin to ring.

Still churning inwardly from his meeting downstairs with Harry Sybert, Jeff jerked the phone out of its cradle—and then the thought, born of hope, reminded him that it might, just possibly, be Marcia.

"Hello?"

A crisp feminine voice said, "Mr. Jeffrey Stoner?"

"Yes." Behind the girl's voice had been the familiar background of long-distance jargon.

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"We're ready with your King City number, Mr. Adams. Go ahead, please."

A man's voice came on. "Jeff?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"P. F. Adams." the man said. A pause. "Our mutual friend, Ann, suggested I call you."

It took a second to register, and then it hit him and he sat down on the bench by the phone. *P. F.*—for *Piggy Ferris*. Except for the sound of Piggy's breathing, the line was now clear, which meant that the long distance operator had cut herself out of the circuit. But Piggy, naturally, would take no chances.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Adams," Jeff said pleasantly. "How is Ann these days?"

Piggy's laugh was dry, without humor. "I see by the papers that she isn't feeling too well."

"That's too bad," Jeff said. "I'm sorry to hear it." He waited a moment. Then, "What can I do for you, Mr. Adams?"

"Why, Ann—the last time I talked to her—told me about a business propositon you made her. It involved me—indirectly, of course—but I found it very interesting. I was wondering if you'd like to talk it over."

Jeff wet his lips. A few hours ago he would have given his left arm for a break like this. But now . . . ? What good would it do him now to play games with Piggy Ferris? His problem now was to stay out of the electric chair, not to get back his detective's shield. He said nothing.

"Jeff?"

"Yeah, I'm still here, Mr. Adams. Go on." When, he wondered, had Ann tipped off Piggy? It must have been between the time he left her with her lesbian friend in Greenwich Village and the time he went to her suite at the hotel. So she'd crossed him after all. She'd called Piggy and warned him.

"Ann told me you were sort of in the soup with your employer," Piggy went on, his voice very friendly now. "She said that you were —well, determined to redeem yourself, and that you thought I might help."

"That's right."

"Are you still interested in doing business?"

"Maybe," Jeff said. "It all depends." So Piggy wanted to give himself up. It didn't make sense. The King City cops wanted Piggy for more than a jewel heist; they were interested in him because of Connie Knight's murder. Both crimes had been committed in the same city, which meant that the D.A. would forget the jewel job

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and concentrate on trying to get Piggy indicted for murder. There was no logical reason for him to want to give himself up to the King City police.

Piggy had been saying something, but Jeff had missed it, and now he asked him to repeat.

"I said that I'd be willing to do business with only one person," Piggy told him. "You. Nobody else." He was silent a moment. "I know you. You have a reputation throughout my field as being one-hundred per cent honest."

"That's kind of you," Jeff muttered. There wasn't much point in stalling Piggy along like this. It'd be better to tell him it was no deal, and hang up.

"Of course," Piggy said, a little more softly, "The price would have to be right."

"Of course," Jeff said.

Without rancor, Piggy said, "All right. To put it briefly, I'm willing to make myself available to you, in connection with the matter about which you talked to Ann. But only provided that you take it on yourself to—" he hesitated "—to disprove any responsibility on my part in connection with the young lady with whom you had such an unfortunate experience at your place of business."

So that was it! At last Piggy Ferris was beginning to make a little sense. "The light finally dawned," he said. "You mean you want me to clear you of—"

"Careful," Ferris warned. "Perhaps you should be a bit more circumspect."

Jeff took a long drag on his cigarette and sucked the smoke deep into his lungs. Here, was the ultimate irony: an innocent man asking the actual murderer to clear him. It was fantastic.

A long moment went by. "Well . . . ?" Piggy asked.

Jeff felt a little numbed. "Mr. Adams," Jeff said. "I'm afraid you've picked the wrong man. It's no deal."

"But why?" Piggy asked. "Certainly you have as much to gain, in your way, as I do in mine. It seems to me that all the risk is on my part. I can't understand . . ."

"I can't go into that," Jeff told him. "It's just no deal."

"Think it over." Piggy said smoothly. "I'll call you again, tonight. Then, if you've changed your mind, we can firm up the arrangements."

There was no point in carrying this out any longer, Jeff knew. "I can tell you now that it's no go." he said wearily.

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"Let's hope you have a change of heart," Piggy said. "I'll call you later on. Take care of yourself." He hung up.

Jeff put the phone down and sat staring at it for a moment. Piggy was a cool one. He'd met only two or three like him in all his experience as a cop. Only a Piggy Ferris could talk of murder raps with the same oily detachment that an insurance salesman might use when talking over a policy conversion. You'd know the salesman was interested, of course, but you never knew *how* interested.

He went out into the kitchen and poured himself a drink, but only a small one, and then he stripped and went into the shower. Twenty minutes later he had shaved and dressed and was rummaging through the dresser drawer that George Bishop always referred to as Jeff's Chest of Horrors. Through the years, Jeff had accumulated almost a full drawer of souvenirs from the crimes he had solved, or helped to solve, and among them was a short-barreled .32 revolver that had belonged to the loser of a pitched gun duel. It wasn't as much gun as his regulation police .38 had been, but it had the advantage of being small, and it would serve his purpose—if that purpose came along. And, he reflected grimly, now it was not so much *if* as *when*. . . .

Its cylinder was empty, but he could buy cartridges later. Not too much later, though; the cops might be by for him an hour from now—or it might be next week. But they'd come for him, he knew.

He put the gun in his right hip pocket and went back to the kitchen and poured another drink. There was only one left in the bottle, and after he'd downed it he called a package store and ordered three fifths of the best bourbon.

Then he began thinking about the cartridges, and he called the package store to cancel his order. He'd better go down and buy the cartridges now; and then, on the way back, he could pick up the liquor. On his way to the door, he glanced back at the phone speculatively, wondering whether it would do any good to call Marcia. Not just yet, he decided; it would probably be some time before she'd speak to him at all.

And even when she did, what was he going to tell her? How could he explain the way he'd acted and the things he'd said? You didn't just go up to the girl you'd planned to marry and say, "I'm sorry, baby, but I just realized that I killed a couple of girls and it sort of upset me. Maybe I acted a little crazy out there at the roadhouse, but I'm okay now. I didn't mean any of the stuff I said out

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there. I was just a little edgy on account of killing a couple of girls, that's all."

And George Bishop . . . That would be a little easier, because George had gone through a little of everything in his time. George might not understand—how in hell could he?—but he didn't make a habit of judging people on the basis of one isolated happening. It would take a lot more than this afternoon to affect George. He'd been hurt, sure—but he'd get over it. Chances were he was concerned only with what was troubling Jeff. No . . . he didn't think he had to worry too much about George Bishop. George was one in a million.

But Marcia? That was something else again. He couldn't remember ever having said a harsh word to her before today. . . .

The fact that he was a murderer was becoming unreal to Jeff. The full realization of what he had done, and of what was going to happen, was there, but somehow it had become endurable, and his emotional reaction had become more diffused and less intense.

It was like being told that you have an incurable disease and that you have a very short time to live. He'd rejected it at first. Then had come horror and pain—and, finally, resignation and the slow wait for death.

He left the apartment and walked down the corridor to the elevator.

When he was less than a dozen steps from it, the doors slid open and a girl came out.

It was Marcia Webster.

Chapter Fifteen

SHE RAN toward him. "Jeff!"

He held out his arms, and she came into them, and for a long moment, neither of them spoke. Over Marcia's shoulder, Jeff saw the elevator operator crane his neck through the open door of his car to stare at them.

Jeff held Marcia tightly. There were a lot of things he wanted to say to her, that he had to say to her, but somehow he couldn't get them past his lips. Through the thin material of her dress he could feel her trembling.

She looked up at him. "I couldn't go back to work. I couldn't think, or anything. I just . . ."

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His hand came up to stroke the thick auburn hair.

Her smoke-gray eyes questioned him. "Jeff . . . Oh, Jeff, what's happened to you?"

He shook his head slowly, and all he could say was, "I don't know, baby. I just don't know."

The elevator operator looked at him darkly. "Down?"

Jeff took Marcia's arm and walked with her to the car. It would have been better to talk to her in the apartment, more considerate of her—but he had to get those cartridges.

As they walked across the foyer, Jeff said, "I've got to pick up something in the hardware store. It'll take only a minute."

She looked at him, surprised. "Right now? Can't it wait?"

He shook his head. "And we need some liquor, too. I just had the last drink." He didn't want Marcia to know that he was buying shells for the revolver, which complicated things. Then he remembered a hardware store a few blocks away, on a street where parking was not allowed during business hours. He drove Marcia there in the Plymouth, got out and closed the door and grinned at her.

"You'd better stay in the car," he told her. "If the traffic cop comes by, you can drive around the block."

She nodded, and he went into the store and bought the shells. There was a package store four doors down, and when he came out of the hardware store he went there and bought three bottles of bourbon.

Back in the car once more, Jeff put the whiskey on the back seat and started the motor. "No cops?"

"No, Jeff . . ."

"Yes?"

"Is—is there another girl?"

He glanced at her sharply. And then, suddenly and insanely, he felt like laughing. *Another girl!*

"No, Baby," he said. "I don't know exactly what it is, but it sure isn't that!"

"I thought maybe . . . Well, I thought you might have gotten tired of waiting. I—I'd hate her, Jeff—but I think I could understand why you might . . . I know it's awfully hard for a man to . . . well, to . . ." She wet her lips and looked at him along her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed.

Jeff laughed softly, and, he hoped, convincingly. "Forget it, Marcia," he said. "It isn't that. There isn't anyone else, and you know it."

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She seemed far from convinced, but she said no more about it. After a few more blocks, she said, "It's too nice to be inside today. Let's go for a drive."

"All right," Jeff said. "Anywhere in particular?"

"No. Just so we get away from the city for a little while."

Once on the highway, Jeff kept just below the limit. In the light Plymouth, it was sufficient to give the illusion of high speed. There was a certain release in driving this fast, a feeling that, at least so far as the automobile was concerned, he had some control over what was happening, some sense of power.

He drove for two hours, and by the time he had circled back to King City and let Marcia out in front of her apartment house, he knew that everything between them—so far as *she* was aware—was almost normal again. She'd surprised him with her jealousy, and even more with her reasons for thinking he might have found someone else. It must have been worrying her considerably to make her bring it out in the open like that. Instead of blaming him for the way he'd treated her and George Bishop, she had assumed that the fault was hers, and, through some strange feminine reasoning of her own, had decided that the basis was sexual.

While he waited for a traffic light to change, he called to a newsboy on the corner and bought a *Sentinel.* A quick glance at the headlines told him that nothing new had turned up on Connie Knight's murder. It was still front-page news, but today's story was, apparently, merely a rehash of what was already known. At the next light, he scanned it quickly. There was nothing there that hadn't been printed before, in one form or another.

Jeff shuddered, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. When the cops got the scent, it was going to be rough.

It seemed to him that he had not so much resigned himself to his fate as he had adjusted to it. A man could adapt himself to almost any situation, he knew. Meek civilians become slaughtering soldiers. Teen-age girls changed, sometimes in a single night, from virgin to prostitute. External conditions could force out a whole new personality. He wasn't just acting like another person now; he *was* another person. He hadn't just changed his way of life; he had changed the way he *felt* about his life, which was an altogether different thing.

He started to turn off on the side street that led to his apartment house, and then changed his mind. There was no point in going home now, he decided. He wasn't in the mood for books or phonograph records, and the idea of being alone in his apartment was distasteful. Further, he was almost afraid to drink alone.

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He stopped at the corner tavern, instead. He needed the sound of other voices, the feeling that life was going on around him.

Sometime between the fourth and the last drink, he realized that there was a way for him to go on living, a way out for him. When the idea first came to him, he thought himself incapable of it, or anything remotely like it—but then, only yesterday, he'd never have thought himself capable of murdering two girls.

He tried to push the idea out of his mind, but it wouldn't stay away. Slowly, the half-formed plan, the vague hope for survival, took form and became something he had to do.

He wasn't going to die for his two murders.

Piggy Ferris was going to die for them.

He was going to frame Piggy for them—or at least one of them—and Piggy was going to fry for them in Jeff's place.

He finished his drink hurriedly and left the tavern. He wanted to be certain he was in his apartment when Piggy called back.

Jeff wanted to live. He wanted to marry Marcia and have kids and . . . But why try to justify it? He had a chance to live, and he was going to take it. It was either Piggy or himself, and that meant that Piggy was going to fry. It was tough for Piggy, and it made Jeff a son of a bitch, but that's the way it was going to be.

At his apartment, he called Marcia and told her he'd see her the next day. Then he went into the kitchen and made a tall highball and settled down to wait for Piggy's long-distance call.

It came three highballs later, at exactly seven-thirty.

Chapter Sixteen

"MR. STONER?" Piggy asked.

"This is Stoner."

"Good. I called a little earlier than I expected to. I'm glad to find you in."

"I've been waiting for your call," Jeff said.

"I hope that means you'd like to do business . . ."

"I think so," Jeff said. "I've been thinking it over. I think we can get together."

"And our agreement will be exactly as I stated it?"

"Exactly."

"I have your word? I must have, you know, before I go any further."

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"You've got it," Jeff said. "Our agreement is clear, and I'll carry out my part of it to the letter. I'm sorry I can't guarantee results—but you know that would be impossible."

"I understand. It's a bargain, then?"

"I said so," Jeff said, "and I meant it. All the way."

"A pity we can't discuss the details over the phone," Piggy said. "There are far too many of them. And of course I'll have to brief you thoroughly before you can do justice to the case. A great deal is involved, you know." He paused. "Do you still have an automobile?"

"Yes."

"Good. I wonder if you'd mind taking a rather long drive tonight?"

"To where?"

"Up in the Catskills. A dreadful nuisance, I know, but I'm afraid it's necessary. Can you do it?"

"If I have to," Jeff said. "But where, exactly?"

"You go to McVerry Village, and stay on the highway all the way through it. At the first road beyond, turn left. It's a gravel road, but it's in pretty good shape. Stay on it for about two miles, and then you'll come to a roadhouse called The Question Mark. It's set far back on the righthand side, but there's a big neon sign just off the road, pointing to it. You can't miss it."

"All right," Jeff said. "I've got that. You'll be waiting there for me?"

"Well, no. . . ."

Jeff felt himself begin to bristle. "What the hell, then?"

"Don't put the wrong construction on that, Mr. Stoner," Piggy said quickly. "I have every confidence in you. It's just that, under the circumstances, I can't be too cautious. When we do meet, I want to be certain that no one knows of our meeting. When I put myself in your hands it will, so to speak, be for good. Between now and then, any number of things might go wrong. I wouldn't want anything to prevent my presenting you with all my information. That's why I must make sure that I have a reasonable time to talk to you alone. You understand, I'm sure."

"Sure, sure," Jeff said. "So I go to this roadhouse. Then what?"

"Why, then you take a table, have a drink and enjoy yourself. The show, I'm told, is quite a shocker. In fact, it amounts to an old-fashioned smoker. Some fraternal lodge rents the place once a month for a get-together, and this is the night."

"That's fine," Jeff said shortly. "But while I'm having a drink and enjoying the girls, what happens?"

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"My representative will contact you," Piggy said. "I'll describe you to my representative in detail. This person will bring you to me—if, as they say, the coast is clear."

"It's a long drive," Jeff said tentatively.

"Yes. And I'm sorry it has to be this way. But it's safer."

"All right," Jeff said. "I'll be there. But don't expect me right away. Nobody ever broke any speed records on those roads."

"Try to make it by ten-thirty, if you can. And you'll have to use a password to get in, plus paying the man at the door two dollars. The password is Hiawatha."

Jeff thought a moment. That seemed to take care of just about everything. "I'll see you later, then," he said. "Take it easy."

"Don't forget the password," Piggy said. "Hiawatha." He hung up.

Jeff took the short-barreled revolver from his pocket and hefted it in his hand. He had loaded it while he waited for Piggy's call, but now he checked it again. It was a very small gun, but with hundreds of hours on the police target range behind him, he wasn't worried about making the most of it.

It was a few minutes past ten when Jeff slowed the Plymouth on the gravel road beyond McVerry Village and turned off at the neon sign in the form of a huge question mark. A small sign above the question mark said *Beer,* and, below it, a red neon arrow pointed toward a dimly-lighted frame structure.

At the door, feeling a little ridiculous, he paid a man with a scarred face two dollars, responded to the request for the password with "Hiawatha" and stepped inside. It was a large, square room, in semi-darkness, with most of the illumination being furnished by the beam of light from a motion picture projector and the reflected light from a large movie screen suspended from one wall. The room was well crowded but, except for the clicking purr of the projector, there was no sound. The movie was a silent one, and of the type Piggy Ferris had told Jeff he might expect.

Jeff glanced at the two male and two female figures as they went into their finale, and then looked around the room for an empty chair. There were none. There was hardly any empty space at all.

The movie ended, the lights came up, and two men who had occupied a chessboard sized table, rose and walked toward the entrance. Jeff went to the empty table and sat down. He had had nothing to drink in almost three hours, and now he wanted whiskey badly. At least, he reflected, he'd been wise enough not to bring a bottle with him on the trip up here. It had been a temptation, but he had re-

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membered the blackouts and his determination never to have another. He had left the liquor in the kitchen.

It had been a long time since Jeff had been at a stag smoker like this one; he felt a little out of place.

The lights went down again. Another movie flickered on the screen. This one, apparently, was going to be about two young ladies who had been stood up by their dates and had called in two bellboys as substitutes. The bellboys seemed to be doing all right.

A fat man with a towel tucked into his belt in lieu of an apron came up to Jeff's table and put an opened can of beer in front of him.

"Four bits," the man said.

"You got any whiskey?" Jeff asked.

"No. Just beer. And it ain't cold." He held out his hand. "Four bits, pal."

Jeff gave him the money. He tasted the beer, and shuddered, and put the can down again. He wished now that he'd brought a bottle. It looked like a dry evening.

He glanced at the screen again. It seemed as though the girls had traded bellboys, but he couldn't be sure. It was hard to distinguish them without clothing.

Finally, the lights came up again. The man who had been operating the projector said, "That's all boys. Don't forget to be here next time. I'll have all new films, and I guarantee you they'll be red-hot."

"The girls!" someone yelled. "Bring on the live meat!" There was a ripple of laughter. A thin man played a few chords on the piano and then went into a fast dance number. A door opened at the far end of the room and a tall brunette with a white streak in her hair made her way through the crowd to the platform and began to dance. She was wearing the conventional strip outfit, and her dance was nothing to get excited about.

Jeff watched her a moment, trying to curb his impatience. This was a wacky arrangement Piggy Ferris had made. All the way up here, just to sit around and watch dirty movies and second-rate cooch dancers while he waited for someone to contact him. It was stupid, and it was a waste of time. He was bored. Damn Piggy, anyhow, for making a production of something that could have been very simple.

The tall brunette was down to her G-string now, Jeff noticed. She squealed, ripped it off with a flourish, and twirled it around above her head like a lariat, while at the same time she went into a series of exaggerated bumps and grinds. The men yelled and urged

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her on to greater heights. It seemed, however, that there was nothing left as a topper. The brunette made two complete turns on the tiny platform, still keeping up her violent bumps and grinds, and then ran off to the sound of equally violent applause.

Jeff looked around the room again. No one was paying any attention to him. Certainly no one seemed to be studying him to see if he matched the description Piggy Ferris said he would give of him.

The next girl was a medium-sized redhead. She was beautiful, and her equipment was not at all conventional. She drew a collective gasp of appreciation from the crowd even before she mounted the platform. She wore a frothy white blouse and a skin-tight green skirt. The piano man slowed to a drag tempo.

The girl held up her hands for quiet, smiled around at her audience and began to recite a poem. It dealt with her experience on a blind date. She related how he had attempted to get fresh, demonstrating exactly how the attempt had been made. Her date had obviously been quite skilled.

It was like nothing Jeff had ever seen before. In spite of his state of mind and the fact that he was here for the express purpose of taking Piggy Ferris back to King City so that he could frame him for murder, he found himself watching the girl's every movement.

It was not because of the sensational nature of her act, nor because she was exquisitely beautiful: it was something else. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, a strange hostility toward her had been building inside him. There was no reason for it, so far as he could fathom. He'd never been given to judging others by the way they made their living, and there was definitely nothing about this girl to irritate anyone, especially any man.

Still, the feeling was there, and it was becoming more pronounced. He tried to look away from her, but her voice kept drawing him back. It couldn't be the whiskey he'd drunk before he left King City. He was a little tight, sure, but he wasn't that tight. Not tight enough to begin disliking people he'd never seen before. It was annoying to feel this way, and yet realize that there was absolutely no reason for it.

The girl was lying on the platform now, on her back, and the surge of yells and cheers from the crowd of men was almost deafening.

Then the girl was on her feet again, waving to the crowd, and the performance was over. She grabbed up her clothing and ran among the tables, circling the room, stopping here and there to pinch a cheek or plant a kiss on a bald head. She passed Jeff, then whirled and came back to jump onto his lap. She was there only a

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second before she slid off again, but it was long enough to whisper, "Out by the gas pumps. In ten minutes."

Jeff watched her flashing away from him toward the door at the far end of the room, and lifted his can of beer again. He took a swallow of it, swished it around in his mouth and spat it out on the floor. So this girl who had just given the filthiest act he had ever witnessed, this lush and lovely redhead, was Piggy Ferris' "representative."

Chapter Seventeen

ALL AROUND him men were beginning to rise and push their chairs back against the walls, clearing spaces on the floor for crap games. A few groups stayed at tables and began playing poker. It was the usual pattern for most of the stag smokers Jeff remembered: first the movies, then the girls, and then gambling. It was all very brotherly, of course, being sponsored by a fraternal organization, and Jeff noticed for the first time that some of the men were eyeing him speculatively. He got up and made his way to the door and stepped outside.

The mountain air was cool and fragrant after the sticky humidity of King City. A dozen deep breaths made him feel a little better. Over to his right, about twenty yards away, he could make out the dark cylindrical forms of three gasoline pumps. They were beyond the periphery of the graveled parking area; probably left over from an earlier day in the history of The Question Mark, and now abandoned. He glanced at his watch, then lit a cigarette and leaned back against the frame front of the roadhouse to wait for ten minutes to pass. A few men came out and went to their cars and drove away. Others came out and stood talking in loose groups near him. But no one paid him any further attention.

When the ten minutes were up, Jeff walked to the pumps. As he approached them, he saw something that hadn't been visible from his position in front of the roadhouse. In the deep shadows just beyond the three pumps, stood a small black coupe. As he came closer he saw that there was a girl behind the wheel, and another few steps brought him close enough to recognize the redhead.

He tossed his cigarette away into the shadows and stood waiting.

The girl's voice was hardly more than a whisper, and yet it carried clearly. "Stoner?"

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Jeff stepped close. "Yes."

"Please get in." She made it light and friendly.

He walked around the small car and got in beside her. As best he could tell, she was wearing the same blouse and skirt she had worn for such a brief time inside the roadhouse.

She started the motor, raced it a little, and looked at him. "Do you mind answering one question?" A musical, trained voice.

"One, or a hundred," Jeff told her. "Let's go."

Her hand came up to push the gear lever into low, but that was all. "I have to be sure. What's your birth date, Mr. Stoner?"

"What is this—a quiz program?" During the ten minutes he had waited in front of the roadhouse, he had almost forgotten his instinctive dislike for this girl; but now it was there again, and stronger than before.

"Please. It's important."

He shrugged. "You got a drink handy?"

"There's a pint in the glove compartment."

He took out the bottle and had a long pull at it and offered it to the girl.

"No, thanks," she said, and her voice was still friendly, still warm. "The date, Mr. Stoner?"

"February 10th," Jeff said. "Happy now?"

She laughed. "Yes. You see, Piggy said he remembered that yours and his were the same, and that I could make certain of you that way."

"He's quite a boy," Jeff said. "Let's go."

She put the coupe in gear and tooled it out to the road. Jeff was aware of her perfume now. It wasn't familiar to him, but somehow it seemed exactly right for a redhead like this one. It was effective, and yet it didn't hit you like a sledgehammer. He was a little surprised. It was difficult to believe that this was the same girl who had performed such a hell of a dance back there in The Question Mark.

"I'm Terri McBride," the girl said.

Jeff grunted.

There was no further conversation until Terri turned off on an even smaller road and stopped in front of a steep flight of stone steps that led up to a small cabin.

She cut the motor. "This is it," she said pleasantly.

As Jeff followed her up the steps, he said, "I'm just curious, but do you mind telling me your connection with Piggy?"

She laughed. "Why should I? I'm his fiancee."

"Lord!" Jeff said.

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She glanced around at him quickly. "Why? What's so awful about that?"

"Nothing," Jeff said. "Nothing at all." So Piggy had acquired still another beauty, and this one, like all the others, thought she was the only one. Piggy had a way about him, that was for sure. Apparently Terri knew *something*, but he was certain she had no real idea of what she was helping Piggy to do. He wondered how quickly that bright mood would change if she did know. Well, what she knew or didn't know was up to Piggy.

At the door the girl knocked lightly in what seemed to Jeff to be a prearranged code. A moment later the door opened, and Jeff followed her inside.

Piggy Ferris said, "Ah, *Jeff!* Good evening!"

Jeff nodded, surprised at the change in Piggy. In the soft glow of the overhead light, Piggy looked twenty years older than he had the last time Jeff had seen him. His flat-planed face, beneath the thick wavy hair, was still strikingly handsome, and his blue eyes still seemed filled with laughter and good will, but now his cheeks were slightly sunken and his once heavy body was thin and a trifle stooped. The man was sick, Jeff knew instantly.

Piggy gestured Jeff toward a deep leather chair and beamed at him. "Damn nice of you," he said heartily. "A hellish trip, really." Behind him, Terri McBride closed the door. The living room was furnished like a hunting lodge, even to the rifles crossed over the fireplace and the moose and deer heads mounted at intervals around all four walls.

"The place is a phony," Piggy laughed as Jeff sat down. "Maybe that's why I like it. Would you like a drink?"

"A big one," Jeff said.

Piggy smiled at Terri. "Would you, please, Terri?"

She nodded, and went up on her toes to kiss Piggy's cheek, and then walked to a door at the rear of the room and through it into what Jeff guessed must be the kitchen.

"A lovely girl," Piggy said. "Lovely."

"Yes," Jeff said. "And a surprising one."

"You must be referring to her dance."

Jeff nodded.

"Well," Piggy said, "we all get our kicks somehow. Liquor, gambling, watching boxers knock one another's brains out. It's a pretty unusual routine she does, I'll admit—but the effect it has on the men is nothing compared to the effect it has on Terri. She *really* gets her kicks that way, if you know what I mean. And who's to

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tell her no? It's harmless enough. Actually, she's quite a lovely person."

"I can't argue that," Jeff said. "But I didn't come up here to talk about Terri."

"No," Piggy said. "Of course not. Well . . . first, I suppose, I should confirm what you've probably already guessed. I'm a pretty sick man."

Jeff said nothing.

"If I weren't," Piggy said, "you may be sure that this idea would never have occurred to me. About giving myself up to the police, I mean. The truth is, I can no longer afford to stay on the lam. I realized nothing on those jewels I took, Jeff. Nothing. My fence hijacked me. I've never operated with the Syndicate, you see, so he could do that and get away with it. If you're a loner, like myself, you have no recourse with the powers that be. You understand?"

"It figures," Jeff said. "What's the rest of it?"

Piggy glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "I feel terribly about the way this is going to hit Terri. She's quite young, and . . ."

"Sure," Jeff said. "But let's talk about you."

Piggy sank down in a chair opposite Jeff's. His shoulders seemed to slump. "The dismal thing about it is that I need medical attention of the most expensive kind, and I can't afford it. I realize that either the King City police or the ones in New York will tab me for murder. Maybe both of them will do that, and then it would be a race to see which of them gets to try me.

"However, if I give myself up to you—on the jewelry issue—I'll be in jail, and entitled to medical attention. I would, of course, expect you to see that the necessary people were approached with a view toward making certain that I did get it." He glanced up at Jeff questioningly.

"All right," Jeff said. "I can take care of that."

"Good. Then, you see, once in jail as a confessed jewel thief and you being credited with 'capturing' me, I'll get treatment and you will have redeemed yourself with the Department and your friends. Before the D.A. can get together a murder indictment against me, it will be your job to use all your skill to find the actual murderer."

Jeff listened to the sounds of drinks being stirred in the kitchen. He wished Terri would hurry.

"A tough job," he said slowly. "You should know how tough it will be, Piggy. It'd be different if I were still a cop, with the whole Department behind me, and authority, and all—but I'm *not* a cop. I'm just a private citizen now, like anybody else."

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Piggy nodded slowly, smiling. "Even so," he said, "it's my only out. It's just a matter of time—maybe even hours—before either King City or New York takes me. I haven't an alibi for either murder, Jeff, and there's no way I can make one. Terri would swear to anything for me, of course, but I hate to think of what a roomful of cops could do to her before they broke her down."

"How much does she know about this?" Jeff asked.

"Only about the jewels. She thinks you're still on the Force, and that you're here to make a deal with me, but she isn't at all clear on just what kind of deal. Actually, all she's concerned about is getting me under a doctor's care. The money she makes from dancing at smokers and the like all goes toward drugs to make it easier for me until then." He smiled thinly. "But even with the best of care, Jeff, I'm afraid the chances are great that I will soon join the Great Majority."

Jeff forced a grin. "Not you, Piggy. You'll beat the rap—somehow."

"Possibly—but not the ones for murder, Jeff. Those, you'll have to beat for me."

Another man literally putting his life into my hands, Jeff thought. The thought of what he was going to do with Piggy's life sickened through him. Why in hell didn't Terri come out with those drinks? She could have made a hundred of them by now.

"What makes you so sure of me, Piggy?" he said quietly.

"Hope," Piggy said. "Hope, Jeff. You're the only hope I've got."

Jeff stared at Piggy's sallow, wasted face. He'd never forget Piggy's face the way it looked at this moment. Through the long years of self-hatred and self-recrimination ahead, he'd see it ten thousand times.

"It's cancer," Piggy said softly. "That's the reason I pulled the jewel job. I needed money, and I needed it fast. I was going to fence the jewels, and then head out west and turn in at the best hospital I could find." He raised his hands and let them drop. "But. . . ."

Jeff felt he had to say something—anything. "You'll beat it, Piggy," he mumbled.

Piggy smiled. "It's possible, I suppose. But now there's something else. I find I've developed a craving for morphine. It was inevitable, of course."

Terri McBride pushed the kitchen door open with her knee and came in with a large tray. There were three drinks on the tray, a bottle of whiskey, another of soda, and a bowl of ice. She pushed a cocktail table closer to Jeff's and Piggy's chairs and put the tray on

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it, and then she handed each man a highball and took the third with her to another easy chair in a corner near the fireplace.

Piggy sampled his drink and put it down and turned his head slightly toward Terri, not looking at her. "Terri, I hate like the devil to ask this—but would you mind leaving Jeff and me alone a few minutes?"

For an instant Terri's eyes were touched with surprise. Then she laughed, got to her feet, and put her glass down on the mantel over the fireplace. "Not at all." She smiled at Piggy. "I think I'll take a shower. That Question Mark seems to get stickier all the time." She brought the smile around to include Jeff and moved around him and out through a small archway to his right.

Jeff finished his drink and leaned forward to make another. He poured the highball glass half full of whiskey, added an inch of soda, and then drank slowly and steadily until the glass was empty again.

Piggy's eyes widened. "I didn't realize you were so thirsty."

Jeff made another drink exactly like the second, and this, too, he put away in a matter of seconds.

Piggy wet his lips nervously. "You all right, Jeff? I mean, there's nothing troubling you, or anything?"

Jeff lit a cigarette and let the smoke spread out through his lungs. "No. Nothing special, anyhow. Just a long, dry trip in the car, that's all."

"Oh. Well, I guess we might as well wrap things up, then, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Jeff said. "You'd better get on the outside of some whiskey yourself, Piggy. You're the one who needs it."

"No, thanks." I—I had a little of the other. There's no need for both."

Jeff studied the bottle on the tray. He had taken it down considerably, and yet, for some strange reason, he had the feeling that this was one time when whiskey wasn't going to affect him, the one time when he needed it most. Now some chemical or psychic block had reared itself and whiskey was going to be about as much good to him as so much water.

He reached out and poured another drink. He filled the glass all the way this time. No need to bother with the soda. Good whiskey went down better without it. And Piggy's whiskey was the best.

Piggy's eyes showed concern. "You'll have to drive us back to King City, remember," he said reproachfully. "I'm not quite up to it."

"Forget it," Jeff said. "We'll get there."

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"I'm beginning to wonder," Piggy said. He took a cigarette from a ribbed-gold case and lit it carefully, studying Jeff over the flame of the lighter. "Man to man, Jeff—just what do you think my chances are?"

Jeff sipped the whiskey, then shrugged and drank half of it. "Damn stuff won't take hold."

"Really now, Jeff!" Piggy said tightly. "Aren't you overdoing it a bit?"

"I told you to forget it," Jeff said. "About your chances—I'd say they're good. I'll do everything I can. I'll work like hell on it. But, like I told you over the phone, I can't guarantee anything."

"I suppose not," Piggy said.

From beyond the archway, Jeff could hear Terri McBride's high heels moving about on a bare wooden floor. It was damn odd, the way he'd felt about her. And it was funny, but, though he'd seen her only seconds ago, he found he couldn't bring to his mind a clear picture of her face. He remembered the lushly curved body, but the face was vague. It was the sort of thing George Bishop would explain by saying that because Jeff had immediately disliked her, his subconscious mind was trying to forget her.

He looked across at Piggy Ferris. Piggy's face seemed a little blurred. "There's no use hanging around here, he said. "We can talk out the rest of it on the way back."

Piggy spread his hands flat on the arms of his chair and raised his thin body wearily. "You're right. There's no point in putting it off any longer." He turned toward the kitchen. "If you'll excuse me a minute, Jeff, I'll get a couple of things I want to take with me."

"You won't need much," Jeff said.

Piggy smiled wryly. "Frankly, I'm going to have a shot. It'll take only a minute, and I'll need it before we get to King City. Might as well take it now."

"I'll go with you," Jeff said.

"No. It's—well a rather embarrassing operation. I'll be right back." He walked across the room and into the kitchen.

Jeff could hear Terri splashing in her shower now. The sound of the water reminded him that he was uncomfortably warm. He loosened his tie and slipped off his jacket. When he drank the rest of the whiskey in his glass, it seemed to have no taste at all. He put the glass down, and somehow the edge of the cocktail table wasn't quite where he'd thought it was, and the glass shattered on the floor.

He stared at the shards of glass at his feet. All right. So he was clumsy. Maybe he was even a little drunk. So what? He reached

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across the table and lifted Piggy's glass and finished that, too. If he was drunk at all, it wasn't *very* drunk. Certainly not *too* drunk. Maybe it was the altitude here in the mountains. He'd be all right, once they were on the road back to King City.

He got to his feet and wandered around the room, looking for something with which to sweep up the pieces of broken glass. He saw a magazine rack in the corner. Fine. Tear off the cover of a magazine and use that like a dust pan. Tear off a few pages and ball them up and use them to push the shards onto the cover. No cut fingers. Brilliant idea. He moved toward the magazine rack. The floor swayed beneath his feet and he stabbed out a hand to catch the back of Piggy's chair. Had he done it again? Could he really be this spiffed? So soon?

He started toward the rack again, and now he knew there was no question about it. He was drunk, all right—drunk as a coot. Which was crazy. There'd been a time when he could drink twice as much as he had tonight, and nobody could have told that he'd even touched it. Maybe he'd better lay off the stuff—at least until he got Piggy in a cell.

He walked slowly to the rack and picked up a magazine and ripped off its cover.

From the kitchen he heard something that sounded like a moan. Then Piggy Ferris' voice—sounding as if it were much farther away than the kitchen—said, "Terri!"

Jeff dropped the magazine and lurched toward the kitchen.

Piggy was sitting on a chair by a white enameled table. His sunken face was twisted with pain and the eyes that turned toward Jeff were filled with it. On the table beside him lay a hypodermic syringe.

As Jeff watched, Piggy suddenly wrapped both arms across his stomach and bent forward across them. "Terri," he moaned softly. "Call Terri in here."

"What in hell—" Jeff began.

"Terri!" Piggy said. "The pain . . . I can't stand . . ."

Jeff stumbled forward. "You had an attack, Piggy?"

Piggy hugged his stomach, swaying from side to side with his torment. "It's sudden, sometimes. Get her, Jeff. She's the only one who—" His voice trailed off as his thin body jerked violently.

"I'll do it for you," Jeff said. He picked up the syringe. "Tell me where."

"No," Piggy breathed. "Terri . . . she . . ." Suddenly his body sagged forward. Before Jeff could catch him, he had fallen to the floor.

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Jeff put the syringe back on the table and knelt to press his hand over Piggy's heart. He was alive, and the wan face was as composed and peaceful as if he were sleeping. After a moment, Jeff rose and stood staring at Piggy. He'd seen men faint from pain before, of course, but that didn't make it any easier to see Piggy lying here like this. And this was the guy he was throwing to the wolves!

He turned away slowly. He'd better get Terri. She'd probably been through this with Piggy before; she'd know what to do for him.

He walked back through the living room and stepped through the archway. The water in the shower had been turned off, he noticed. The room just inside the archway, to the left, was the bathroom. The door was open and the room was empty. There was only one other door, just beyond the bathroom, and he moved toward it. The second door was partly open. He came abreast of it, and glanced inside. He saw Terri and at the same instant felt as if he'd been clubbed a numbing blow on the head. She was completely naked.

The girl was standing in front of a tall, old-fashioned dresser, her back toward him, drying her hair. Then, as he watched, she turned around slowly toward him, working the towel vigorously; but her head was bent and her face was hidden from him by the towel.

Chapter Eighteen

TERRI LOWERED the towel and tossed her hair back over her shoulders. For one long moment her eyes locked with Jeff's, and then she gasped and whipped the towel in front of her.

To Jeff Stoner, it seemed that the cry he knew she was trying to force past her lips would never come. He took a step toward her, and still the girl stayed where she was, standing as white and motionless as if her body had been carved from marble.

Jeff lurched toward her, and at last the scream burst from her throat. She nearly split his eardrums. She darted to one side, trying to run around him to the door. He reached out and caught her easily and jerked her toward him. Everything was fuzzy now: Terri's body had suddenly acquired a pinkish cast.

With his free hand he reached up and caught her by the hair and jerked her head back. He had to get this over with in a hurry.

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There was a crazy red mist coming from somewhere. He had to kill Leda before the mist got so thick that he couldn't see her face. That hair! *That damn red hair!* And how she could scream! He yanked her head back further and moved his other hand from her arm to her throat.

She clawed at him, and he ducked his head away an instant before the fingernails would have raked his face. She was a tough one, all right. Plenty tough. But only a girl. Why couldn't she realize that fighting him would do no good? Why couldn't Leda quit struggling and take what was coming to her? He got the fingers of his right hand locked securely around her throat. Didn't Leda know there was no way out? Didn't she know she *had* to die like this?

She kicked at him. He moved slightly to one side and forced her down on the floor. Suddenly the red mist was so thick he could no longer make out the features of her face. He felt his fingers begin to ache. But the movement of Leda's pulsing throat beneath his hand was weaker now, and that was good. He increased the pressure, little by little.

He couldn't see Leda's face at all now. It was like being at the bottom of a sea of blood. . . .

Jeffrey always hated it when Aunt Helen made him go to the store with her. Aunt Helen was taller than Mother, and she always walked so fast that he couldn't keep up with her. And she never let go his hand a minute, always dragging him along and scolding him for not walking faster. When he was grown up he'd be even taller than Aunt Helen, he bet, and then he'd show her how fast he could walk.

Aunt Helen was carrying a package of meat in one hand, and with the other she tugged at him and said, "Jeffrey—for goodness sake, *mus*t you hang back like that?"

They were at the steps leading up to the house now, and Aunt Helen pulled him up them so fast that he almost stumbled and hurt himself. He wished Aunt Helen would stay away from them.

Aunt Helen opened the front door and walked back to the kitchen. Jeffrey sat down on the floor.

"Grace," Aunt Helen called. "I'm back."

Mother didn't answer. She must have gone out someplace, Jeffrey thought. The way Aunt Helen yelled, anybody could hear her all over the house.

"Grace!" Aunt Helen called again. "Grace, where are you?" She came out of the kitchen and climbed the stairs and Jeff heard her

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steps going into the big bedroom. Then he heard the steps come out of the bedroom and go down the hallway toward the bathroom.

And then Aunt Helen screamed. It made Jeffrey catch his breath, it was such an awful scream, and for a second he couldn't move. Aunt Helen screamed again. Jeffrey got up and climbed the stairs as fast as he could. Aunt Helen was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, and just as he got up to her she screamed again.

She heard him there behind her and whirled around and tried to grab him. "Go back!" she cried. "Go back downstairs, Jeffrey!"

But he slipped out of Aunt Helen's hands and looked in the bathroom.

Mother was in there, lying on the floor with blood coming out of her throat. Near Mother's head Jeffrey saw Daddy's straight razor, and it was all bloody. Mother was trying to say something, and every time her lips moved the blood on her throat would start bubbling.

"Jeffrey!" Aunt Helen yelled. "Go next door to Mrs. Embrick's and tell her to call a doctor! Tell her it's life or death! Run, Jeffrey!"

He ran down the stairs and told Mrs. Embick what Aunt Helen had said, and then he ran back and climbed the stairs again and tried to get past Aunt Helen so he could help Mother. But Aunt Helen caught him by the arm and held him back.

". . . broke up my home," his mother was saying. Her voice had a funny sound, like she was trying to whisper and whistle at the same time. ". . . that little tramp . . . my husband . . . now he's run off with her . . . sold the house and took the money and . . . and ran off with her . . ."

"No, no!" Aunt Helen said. "Grace! He didn't run off with her, Grace. The doctor's coming. You'll be all right. Grace—why, oh why . . ."

"He ran off," Mother gasped. "Leda Thomas just . . . just called long distance from . . . from Miami. She . . . she wanted to laugh at me. She broke up my home . . . and now . . . and now she and my husband are . . ."

"Grace!" Aunt Helen cried. "Don't say anything more! The doctor will be right here, Grace." Suddenly Aunt Helen sank down on her knees and covered her eyes with her hands and began to cry.

There was a lot of noise downstairs, and pretty soon a lot of people were coming up the steps and crowding around them. Jeffrey was crying, and he couldn't stop, but nobody acted like they even saw him. Pretty soon a man with a beard and a little black bag came and bent over Mother a while, and then he told everybody to

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get away from Mother. Jeffrey stayed where he was, but still nobody seemed to notice him. In a few more minutes another man with a small black bag came and he, too, bent down over Mother. This second man was younger than the other one and he was wearing a white coat.

The younger man straightened up and looked at the man with the beard. "A trip for nothing," he said.

The man with the beard nodded, but didn't say anything.

"I never saw it fail," the younger man said. "You notice the hesitation marks around the main cut?"

"Yes. It seems they always do that. They have to take a few trial swipes at their throat before they get up enough nerve to cut for keeps."

"Funny thing," the young man said. "How they can hack themselves half a dozen times like that, and still go through with it, is beyond me." He shrugged. "Well . . . You the family physician?"

"Yes," the older man said. "I'll take it from here."

"And you're welcome," the young man said. "What a mess."

Jeffrey didn't want to look at Mother any more. He walked along the hallway to the big bedroom and got up on the bed and put his arms up around his head. He wanted to cry, and yet somehow he couldn't. He kept thinking of Mama the way she looked when she fixed herself up real pretty so that Daddy could take her to the movies. He couldn't think of her any other way.

What had Mother meant about Leda breaking up her home and running off with Daddy? That was silly. Daddy wouldn't go anywhere with Leda. Daddy knew Mother didn't like Leda, and Daddy wouldn't go anywhere with anybody Mother didn't like. There was a pain in his stomach, like there'd been that night Mother had to give him that bitter tasting stuff in the little green bottle.

It was a funny feeling, to want to cry and not be able to. When Mother got all right again—the way Aunt Helen said she would—he was going to ask her what she meant about Daddy and Leda Thomas.

Jeff, returning to his senses, was aware first of the tremendous ache in his wrist and arm and shoulder. He seemed to be crouching down somewhere in utter blackness, holding tightly to something with his right hand.

Then, abruptly, his vision cleared, and he was staring straight into the hideously purple face of Terri McBride. With a choked cry, Jeff jerked his hand away from her throat. He fell backward,

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unbalanced by the violence of his movement, but he quickly got his hands and knees beneath him and pushed himself erect.

He looked down at the girl—and suddenly the voices of his mind were screaming at him again, asking *why* he had done this. He knew he had killed Terri; he could remember clearly the exact moment at which he had decided he *had* to kill her.

But why? Why?

He waited for the sickening reaction he was sure must come. But it did not. There was only the ache in his arm and the one-word question hammering at him again and again: Why? It was as if his other two murders had drained him of all normal reaction, as if killing two girls had somehow seared the areas in his brain that controlled such things as guilt and remorse and self-recrimination.

He seemed capable only of wonder—wonder, and the first faint stirrings of fear. . . .

He looked down at his hands. There were shallow dark grooves on their backs, where Terri's fingernails had gouged the flesh. He turned slowly and walked to the bathroom and ran water over his hands and dried them on tissue and flushed the tissue down the toilet. Not only had he killed again, but he had destroyed his chances of framing Piggy for the other two killings.

Unless. . . .

There was only one thing to do, only one way out. He had no choice. *It had to be.* Instead of paying for two murders, Piggy Ferris was going to pay for three of them.

Listening carefully for any sound from the direction of the kitchen, Jeff took a fingernail brush from the glass shelf above the basin and soaped it thoroughly. Then he went back to the bedroom and scrubbed his blood and skin from beneath Terri McBride's long scarlet nails. He dried her hands with the towel she had been using when he had surprised her. He turned her body over, looked beneath it, and then made an inch-by-inch search of the entire floor. There was nothing. He hadn't thought there would be, but even a stray button might be enough to fry him.

He took the towel back to the bathroom and threw it into a hamper. Still alert for sounds from the kitchen, he twisted the handle of Piggy's safety razor and removed the blade. He was functioning mechanically, thinking no further ahead than the next operation of his fingers. He put the blade in the breast pocket of his jacket and walked out into the living room. It took but a moment to wipe the bottle and Piggy's glass with his handkerchief. He

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collected the shards of the broken glass in the pages he had torn from the magazine, and these he stuffed into his pocket. He gave the room the same meticulous search he had given the bedroom. There was one thing more. He fished the butt of his cigarette from the ash tray and put it in his pocket.

Then, using his handkerchief, he put the highball glass over the neck of the bottle and carried them into the kitchen.

Piggy Ferris lay just as Jeff had left him. Jeff looked at his watch. It seemed incredible, but less than ten minutes had passed since he'd gone after Terri. He knelt down beside Piggy and pressed Piggy's hand around the glass and bottle several times. Then he took the bottle and glass back into the living room and put them on the cocktail tray and returned to the kitchen. He knelt down by Piggy again and pushed Piggy's sleeves far up on his wrists. Until this moment, he'd been able to put this part of it out of his mind.

He took out the razor blade and poised it over Piggy's right wrist. It wasn't a question of whether he wanted to do this or not: he *had* to do it. It had to look as if Piggy had killed Terri and then committed suicide. What the hell was he waiting for?

He made a tentative pass at Piggy's wrist—and jerked the blade back just in time.

He was breathing rapidly, and there was a pain deep in his chest. He tried again, and again he pulled the blade away a scant half-inch from Piggy's wrist.

And now he realized that he wasn't going to kill Piggy. He couldn't. He had killed three people, but it had not been in cold blood. He had done that with another part of his brain: he hadn't been able to help himself. But he could help this, and he knew that he wasn't capable of killing Piggy Ferris. He had killed—three times—but those three killings had been of his hand, *but not of his mind*.

There was something about the feel of Piggy's flesh. It was not cold, but it seemed less warm than it had a moment ago.

Jeff presed his thumb firmly against Piggy's wrist. There was no pulse. He moved his hand up to cover Piggy's heart. He kept it there a long time.

Long enough to know that Piggy Ferris was dead.

Killed by an inner assassin who had been less hesitant than the murderer who knelt beside him.

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Chapter Nineteen

THE WALK back to The Question Mark was long and rocky and dark. It took Jeff fully twice as long as he had expected it to, and by the time he reached the Plymouth, he was almost exhausted. He'd been half tempted to take Terri's car as far as the roadhouse, but he knew that it couldn't stay there long before somebody began to ask questions. And the longer she and Piggy remained undiscovered, the better.

The parking area was still filled with cars and, from the amount of shouting and laughter coming from the roadhouse, the smoker was still very much in progress. He was in luck; there was no one around the parking area, and he got the Plymouth out of the lot and onto the road without seeing anyone on foot or meeting anyone in a car.

Traffic was light on the highway back to King City, and he kept the Plymouth up to the limit. But no car could have gone fast enough for him tonight. He felt a desperate urgency to put as much distance as he could between those two corpses back there and himself, and to do it in a hurry.

His plans had been wrecked; but, strangely, the knowledge that he no longer could frame Piggy for murder brought with it not so much frustration as relief. He wondered vaguely if he could have gone through with the frame-up. He doubted it. He hadn't been able to kill Piggy, and the chances were great that he could not have gone all the way with letting him die for murder he had not committed. He had thought he could do it, had been determined to do it—but then he had tried to cut Piggy's wrists, and could not.

No, he thought, I couldn't have gone through with it. It was something to think about, to kid myself about, but I couldn't have gone through with it.

But now he was back where he was before the idea had come to him: facing the penalty not for two, but three murders.

By the time Jeff reached his apartment house, he knew what he had to do. Nothing was going to save him from his fate forever, of course, but it was possible he might keep his freedom a few extra weeks, or even months. There was a chance he could stretch the months into a year. Eventually, they would get him, but until then. . . .

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He parked the Plymouth and went upstairs to pack. He filled only one bag, a large two-suiter, and the clothing he selected was the kind he thought would be appropriate in Mexico. Sport shirts and summer socks and underclothes. There'd be no trouble getting into Mexico itself; it was getting out of Mexico and into Central America that worried him. Still, there was a little more than two thousand dollars in the bank. Men were the same the world over, and what he couldn't say in Spanish he might be able to say in dollars. He would wait, and he would find the right person, and then he would be in Central America. All things were possible—with money.

He fought against the idea of seeing Marcia again before he left. He wanted to—he felt almost as if he *had* to—but it wasn't wise. He knew he wouldn't be able to see her without acting strangely and it wasn't fair to her. Better to call her and say he was going away on a trip. She'd worry then too, of course, but not to the same degree.

He waited until he was sure she'd be up, and called her; and putting the phone down again, knowing he had heard her voice for the last time, was one of the most difficult things he had ever done. He'd been as vague as possible in telling her that he was still hot on the trail of Piggy Ferris, and that he'd be back in a day or so. It had sounded weak, even to him, but there'd been nothing else he could do.

He drove the Plymouth to a service station and had it checked mechanically. While he was waiting, he remembered that he had forgotten to bring any liquor. He went to a package store and bought two fifths of bourbon and put them on the front seat.

The Plymouth, he found, was in good shape. He bought a tank of gas, paid the attendant, and drove to the bank. Twenty minutes later, he was on his way south. He drove steadily, and when his lack of sleep began to catch up with him, he opened one of the bottles of bourbon. From then on, he helped himself to the whiskey often, and, by mid-afternoon, he suddenly realized that he was too drunk to drive.

He slowed, and at the first side road he turned right and followed it for half a mile to a place where he could pull the Plymouth over behind a clump of small trees and bushes. He heard water running somewhere nearby, and for a moment he toyed with the notion of reviving himself with it. But he needed more than cool water; he needed sleep, and lots of it. He had denied his body as long as he could, and he might as well catch a few hours here as anywhere. He raised the windows and locked the doors and stretched his big

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body out as best he could. He could still hear the water off there somewhere. It was his last thought.

He awoke to the sound of voices and the deep roar of an automobile motor without benefit of a muffler. The night was bright with moonlight. Jeff cursed, and sat up, and pushed the door open. The air inside the car was fetid and hot. He stepped out onto the grass, and now he could see the cause of the sounds that had awakened him. An open-top hotrod, loaded with teen-agers, was just pulling off the road a few yards away. He watched as four boys and four girls got out and disappeared into the trees at the side of the road.

His mouth felt terrible, and his head was pounding with pain. It was the daddy of all hangovers. He leaned back inside the car and got the fifth of whiskey and took a long drag at it. He gagged and almost lost it, but somehow he forced down another. Then he sat down on the seat, with his feet out on the grass and waited for the whiskey to take hold.

He didn't have long to wait; and, with the clutch of the whiskey, came a terrific thirst. Over there to his left, the running water sounded even more enticing in the night than it had earlier in the hot sunlight. He stripped off his shirt and, carrying the nearly empty bottle, walked across the road and down an incline to the heavier growth of bushes that indicated the waterway.

It was a large stream, but too small to call a river, and the water was very rapid. He knelt and splashed water on his face and neck. From upstream he heard other splashing sounds. He remembered the hotrod. Those kids were probably swimming up there, beyond the screen of vines and bushes. He stood up, knuckling the water from his eyes, and now he could see them. They were much closer than he'd thought.

Then he blinked his eyes and squinted through the screen of bushes again. Either he was drunk as all hell, or else those eight kids were as naked as the day they were born.

He watched them, feeling a little sorry for himself, trying to remember exactly how it felt to be fourteen or fifteen or sixteen. He couldn't; it was too many years ago. Too many experiences ago.

Except for the small splashing sounds, they were making no noise at all, now, he noticed. Probably they didn't want to attract too much attention if a car went by. They wouldn't have seen his Plymouth, because of the stand of small trees and bushes behind which he'd parked it.

He found his eyes coming back again and again to one of the girls. She was prettier than the others, and her figure was mature

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for her age: but it wasn't that. He felt no physical reaction to her at all. But—there was something about her. He couldn't take his eyes from her.

Her hair. That was it. In the clear wash of moonlight, it was a red-gold color, so lustrous that the moonlight gave it a tiny nimbus. Jeff reached down for the bottle and took another drink. *That damn hair.*

One of the boys in the group came up behind the girl and pushed her head under water. She came up gasping, and laughing, and caught the boy around the neck.

Jeff shook his head, to clear it. He'd drunk too much too fast—and he'd never quite sobered up from last night before he began drinking again. These last few drinks had really fixed him. And so what? He felt strong again, and that was the only important thing. He was no longer sleepy, and he could drive as well as anybody on the road. What was the difference whether he was drunk or not? Hell, he had a right to be drunk, didn't he? He didn't have long to live; he had to make the most of it.

He took another drink. There was a sudden contraction of abdominal muscles, but the liquor stayed down. He moved the bottle around in a small circle and listened to it. Not much left. Maybe he'd better go back to the car for the other one. He killed what was left of the whiskey on the way back to the Plymouth.

A minute later, he was back in the bushes with the fresh bottle, watching the teen-agers, the red-haired girl in particular.

The boy who had ducked her once did it again.

Why doesn't the fool kid drown her? Jeff thought. He's big and strong enough to do it—and the little bitch deserves it. What was the guy waiting for?

He shifted his position impatiently. All the kid would have to do would be clip the redhead on the jaw and stick her head under for about five minutes. The glistening white bodies were beginning to seem a little blurred. There must be a lot of ground fog around here.

Then, as Jeff put the bottle to his lips again, the girl and boy began to move downstream toward him, and he could hear the girl's soft laughter as she turned a moment to splash water back into the boy's face.

Jeff tensed. If she got close enough. . . .

The boy and girl left the water. Jeff's fingers tightened on the bottle. They were walking straight toward him. He'd show that punk kid how it ought to be done. Less than three yards from the place where Jeff crouched in the bushes, the boy and girl stopped

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and sank down to the grass. They were hidden from the water now, and from their companions, in a small clearing in the brush.

Jeff edged forward until he was at the edge of the clearing, behind the last few remaining bushes before the thick grass began. The girl put up her arms and pulled the boy down to her. Jeff heard her murmur something, and the boy's tight answer.

Now's the time, Jeff thought. They could have been making love on a railroad track with an express train bearing down on them, and they wouldn't have cared. He took a cautious step into the clearing, hefting the bottle. So far, so good. He took another step, and raised the bottle shoulder-high. Too bad the boy had to get hurt, too; but he was in the way.

He hadn't been aware of making any sound, but suddenly the boy's head jerked around toward him. Before the boy could cry out, Jeff moved in fast and clubbed the bottle hard against the side of his head. The boy fell away from the girl, and then Jeff was over her, his knees grinding down on her forearms so that she could not fight him.

"Leda," he muttered. "Leda, you little bitch! Did you think you could run away from me forever? Didn't you know I'd find you?" He held her throat just tightly enough to keep her from screaming.

She had the bluest eyes he had ever seen. Even in the moonlight, they were an almost startling blue. Blue—and ugly. Bulging out like that. You'd think she'd be glad to get it over with. Maybe she was but she was still terrified. He increased his pressure and watched the eyes bulge even more. She was kicking her feet against the ground, trying to throw him off her. A hell of a lot of good that was going to do.

From the direction of the water he heard someone calling a girl's name. Velma. And then someone out there laughed and called a boy's name, too. Tommy.

So Leda had been trying to pass herself off as someone named Velma, had she. Well, they'd find out soon enough that it hadn't worked. He'd caught up with her. From behind him came the sound of a sigh, and Jeff glanced back over his shoulder. The boy—Tommy—was stirring a little. He'd have to take care of Leda fast. No time to wait for her to choke to death.

He kept one hand on her throat, and with the other he reached up and caught Velma's red-gold hair. He tensed his muscles, and jerked her head sideways with every ounce of strength he had. Velma's neck made a sound like a dry twig snapping. Her legs stopped threshing, and beneath him he felt her body go soft

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and lax. It had been a shame, to have to do it so quickly like this, but it couldn't be helped. Leda was dead, and that was what mattered.

He got to his feet and lifted the whiskey bottle and hit the boy behind the ear. The boy quit stirring. Then Jeff walked back to the Plymouth and started the motor. He had another drink and listened to the voices calling for Velma and Tommy. He smiled grimly and screwed the cap back on the bottle. The thought of a bunch of naked kids calling to a naked corpse was funny somehow. He felt clean and good, as if he'd been sick for a long time and had, through some miracle, become well again in a matter of minutes.

He nosed the Plymouth out onto the road and started back toward the main highway. He turned on the radio and dialed until he found some Dixieland. Nothing like Dixieland. He reached for the bottle, and then pushed it away from him. He didn't need any more liquor.

He felt fine just the way he was.

Chapter Twenty

JEFF HAD stood before George Bishop's door a full minute before he raised his hand to knock. It wasn't a matter of nerve; it was simply that he wanted to be completely certain of the way he was going to handle this. There'd be no opportunity, later, to correct mistakes.

He knocked softly.

Trudy Stevens opened the door. For the first time Jeff could remember, Trudy was completely dressed. Her hair-do and gown were chic, but still she looked only seventeen. She stared at him, dark eyes instantly stormy.

Jeff shrugged and brushed past her. George Bishop was knotting his necktie. He glanced at Jeff and nodded, without smiling.

"George," Jeff said, "I've got to talk to you. It has to be now, and"—he glanced briefly at Trudy—"it has to be alone."

Trudy laughed nastily and slammed the door. "You say you've got to, eh?"

George stood very still, studying him. "We were going out, Jeff . . ."

"I'm sorry," Jeff said. "But this isn't just a whim, George."

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"Some other time, friend," Trudy said. "You heard what George said. "We're going out."

George sighed and finished knotting his tie. "Trouble?"

Jeff nodded.

"Baby," George said to Trudy, "why don't you go down to the corner saloon and wait for me?" He glanced inquiringly at Jeff. "Will this take long, Jeff?"

"Not too long."

"Go ahead, then, Trudy," George said. "I'll be down as soon as I can."

"To hell with you both," Trudy said. "I don't feel like drinking. It's too hot. I'm going to a movie." She picked up her handbag, yanked the door open again, and was gone.

George smiled. "Peppery kid, sometimes. Well, Jeff . . . ?"

"You still have that portable typewriter?"

"Yes."

"Get it out. I want you to take something down."

"Are you sober, Jeff?"

"Enough to know what I'm doing. Get the typewriter, George."

When George had set the typewriter on the cocktail table and seated himself in front of it, Jeff said, "This is probably the biggest favor I ever asked of you, George. I want you to type out a statement for me. A confession."

"A confession? Are you serious, Jeff? What in the world about?"

"Murders," Jeff said. "Four of them."

George rolled a sheet of paper into the machine and laughed drily. "Only four?"

Jeff turned away from George; he didn't want to see George's face just now, to watch the slow crawl of horror across it when George finally realized that this was for real.

"Only four, George," he said. "And all girls." He sat down on the sofa and stared at the rug. "The first one was Connie Knight. I—"

"Jeff," George said stiffly, "a joke's a joke, but this isn't even—"

"It's no joke, George. I only wish it were." He moistened his lips. If he could only control the trembling in his hands, he could write this himself. "Just type down what I say, George, and please don't say anything. I've got a good reason for doing things this way, instead of going to the police. And it's something I have to get out all in one piece, or I won't get it out at all."

"You *are* serious!" George gasped. "Good Lord, man, you—"

Jeff was glad he wasn't looking at George. "Please, George. Don't say anything until I'm finished. Just type. Start like this . . ."

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From then on, for three-quarters of an hour, there was only the drone of Jeff's voice and the clatter of the typewriter.

When, finally, George took the last sheet of paper from the machine, Jeff read the confession through quickly but carefully.

"That ought to do it, George," he said. He uncapped his fountain pen, signed his name at the bottom of each page, and handed the typescript to George.

George frowned at it a moment, then put it down on the cocktail table. "But why me, Jeff? Why not the police?"

"I think you know why not," Jeff said. "I think you've already guessed."

George shook his head slowly. "If it's why I think it is, then I hope I'm wrong."

"Just don't ask me *why* I killed them. I can't tell you, because I don't know."

George's eyes came up slowly to lock with Jeff's, as if he were trying to look through them and into Jeff's brain.

"Maybe I don't have to ask that, Jeff," he said softly. "Maybe . . ."

"What are you talking about? How could you know anything about it?"

George was silent a long moment. He picked up the typescript and glanced at it, and then put it down again.

"You say each of these girls had red hair, Jeff?"

"Yes, they did. But what's red hair got to do with it? I sure as hell didn't kill them because of that!"

"I don't know," George said. "I think maybe you did. That, and some other things."

Jeff looked at him sharply. "For instance?"

"I think there was a pattern, Jeff—a combination of certain things that made you want to kill those girls. Red hair was one thing. Then, too, you say all the girls were nude, or nearly so. And all four times, Jeff, you were very drunk."

"And that's supposed to be something more than a coincidence? Sorry, George, but you're off on the wrong track."

"I think not," George said. "I think it all goes back to something else, something that happened when you were quite small. He gestured toward the typescript. "In there, you mention that the name 'Leda' kept recurring to you, time after time. I seem to remember your once telling me about a maid your folks had, when you were hardly more than a baby. Her name was Leda, too, wasn't it, Jeff?"

"Yes, but—"

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"And she had red hair?"

"That's right. I don't remember much else about her, except for one incident. But, yes, she had red hair."

"And you still can't see the connection, Jeff?"

"You mean you think there is one?"

"Definitely. Leda was a redhead, Jeff. She was around you constantly at an age when you were extremely impressionable. You told me once that she came between your parents. You couldn't understand the full significance of that, then, of course, but it affected you profoundly. It induced a sort of trauma, a severe shock to your brain that you never quite got over. Then, shortly afterwards, your father abandoned your mother and ran off with Leda. That was an even greater shock. But the worst shock of all, Jeff, was your mother's suicide. That clinched things."

Jeff got to his feet. "I've overstayed my time," he said. "I've got to—"

"Hold on a minute," George said. "This incident you say you remember—the one with Leda. Was it—sexual?"

"Yes."

"Unnatural?"

Jeff nodded. "But I was just a kid, remember. I didn't know the difference."

"One more question," George said. "When this happened—was Leda in the nude?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much," George said. "I can see the whole thing now." He got up and began to pace the floor in front of the sofa. "You were drunk when you killed these girls, Jeff. Liquor strips off our inhibitions, just like stripping layers off an onion. In a sense, it makes children of all of us. Enough whiskey can sometimes stir up some pretty horrible things in a man's subconscious mind, Jeff. That's what happened to you.

"You hated Leda—for what she had done to your parents, and therefore to you. You bore this hatred, buried somewhere deep in your brain, all your life. And along with the hatred was the idea that Leda must be punished. A child is conditioned to associate punishment with wrongdoing, and, once planted, the obsession to punish Leda grew stronger as you grew older. You weren't aware of it, of course. But it was there."

Jeff walked slowly to the phonograph and turned it off. There was a half-finished highball on top of it. He picked it up and swirled the ice cube around the glass, and thought about all that George had said.

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"Well?" George asked finally.

"Let's see if I've got it straight, George," Jeff said. "As I see it, when I'm drunk my mind goes back to what happened when I was a kid. I dredge up this hatred I've had for Leda all along, and I get the urge to punish her. But that doesn't happen unless the girl I'm with is redheaded, like Leda was, and naked—the way Leda was. Then, somehow, I think it *is* Leda, and I . . ." He broke off.

"That's what happened," George said. "It's sort of a three-way combination lock to your subconscious hatred and desire to punish. Red hair, and nakedness, and liquor. It's a sort of mental time-bomb that's been in you all the time, Jeff, waiting for the right combination to explode it. There are damn few redheads, anywhere, and so the chances of your being with one who was naked at the same time you were drunk, and under circumstances where no one else was around to stop you, are slim. Even so, it's a wonder the combination didn't come up before. Maybe it did, a few times, but you simply weren't drunk enough to go all the way."

Jeff finished the highball and studied the empty glass thoughtfully. "I remember a couple of times when I felt an urge to mistreat Marcia," he said. "Once when she was wearing shorts and a halter, and another time when we were out swimming. It worried the hell out of me, both times. I loved her, and I couldn't understand why that feeling came over me."

"Well," George said gently, "now we know. Marcia can just thank her stars that you were no drunker than you were. She's a redhead, and that means she's been living on the thin edge of death for a long time." He stopped pacing and picked up the pages of Jeff's confession. "And what now, Jeff?"

"I just wanted to get it down in black and white," Jeff said slowly. "It's all there—everything." He looked at his watch. "It's eight o'clock, George. I haven't had any sleep since yesterday afternoon. I'm going home and—" He stopped and laughed shortly. "But there's no use trying to kid you, is there?"

"No, Jeff. None at all."

"Well, it's almost over, anyhow. I must have driven a hundred miles further south, after I killed Velma, before I sobered up enough to realize what I'd done. I knew then that I could never run away from myself. There'd be other redheads . . . other killings. There was only one thing to do. I had to fix it so that I couldn't kill again." His throat felt tight and dry. "And that's why I came back today, George. I drove slowly, and thought it over—and there wasn't any other way."

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"But there is," George said quickly. "Psychiatry can cure you, Jeff."

"No. Not me, George. It's too late."

"At least give it a chance. I doubt that any court would . . ."

"It's no use," Jeff said. "I know they wouldn't give me the chair. They'd say I was insane. You know what that means. I couldn't live in an asylum, George. I'd die there, and it would be a lot slower and a lot worse than the other. No, George; there's only one way. My way. And I want it to end here, in King City, where I've spent my whole life. I don't know why, but that's the way I want it to be."

George's face was pale. "I'm not trying to play God, Jeff, but—"

"I have a gun in my belt," Jeff told him. "The first thing you'll do when I leave here is call the police and tell them to stop me. But they won't, George, so don't bother even trying. I'll do it just the same, and all you'd do would be to hurry it along."

George Bishop said nothing.

"Wait two hours," Jeff said. "*Then* call the police and give them the confession. Put it in an envelope and seal it, and when the police come, tell them I typed it here myself and made you swear you wouldn't open it for two hours. Then, when you saw what it was, you knew your duty."

"Jeff! In heaven's name . . ."

"There's no other way," Jeff said. He moved to the door and opened it.

"Jeff!"

"Good-bye, George," he said, and closed the door behind him.

Back in his own apartment, Jeff worked rapidly. The things he had to do weren't going to take him a full two hours, but he wanted to keep busy up till the last minute. He didn't want to think; he didn't *dare* think. All that was required of him now was to act.

He took the money he had withdrawn from the bank and put in an envelope and addressed it to Marcia Webster. For a moment, he had debated whether or not to enclose a note. He had decided against it. There was too much to say, and no way to say it. George would tell her some of it, of course. . . . He walked down the corridor to the mail slot and dropped the envelope into it, and then came back to the apartment and fixed the door lock so that it could be opened from the outside without a key. No use causing the police any more trouble than was necessary.

There was nothing else to put in order. No papers, no letters to write, no other good-byes to say. Nothing.

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He went into the bathroom and sat down on the edge of the bathtub and took the short-barreled revolver from his belt. He looked at it a moment, small and dark and efficient, listening to the familiar sounds around him. It was almost as if he were hearing them for the first time. Funny, how many of them there were, once you really noticed them. Muffled radios and faraway voices and the sound of high heels upstairs. The sudden rush of water in the flush-box in the next apartment. The traffic sounds floating up from the street. . . .

He put the gun in his mouth. It had an oily taste. He took it out of his mouth and spat and looked at the inch-long barrel.

He couldn't do it.

Not this way.

He got up and walked to his dresser and opened the drawer that George Bishop called his Chest of Horrors. He hunted among the souvenirs of murder until he found the tiny aluminum anal capsule. Cyanide was better, anyhow. He might not be able to pull a trigger, but he could most certainly take poison. There was something about the few moments of grace between the time you swallowed it and the time it killed you, that made all the difference.

The aluminum capsule was so tightly fitted together that it took Jeff several seconds to open it. Then, once he was sure the two parts were loose, he carried it out into the kitchen. His hand was shaking badly. Maybe he'd better have a drink. He didn't want to lose his nerve with *this* too.

He opened one of the bottles of bourbon on the drainboard and tilted it. He drank until his stomach began to retch. When he looked at the bottle he was surprised to see that he'd drunk almost a third of it.

He sat down at the kitchen table with the bottle in front of him and stared at it. One more slug like the last one and he wouldn't need the cyanide. He wondered what effect the whiskey would have on the action of the poison. He'd heard a medical examiner say something about that once, but he couldn't remember what it was. The most whiskey could do would be to slow down the cyanide a little. On the other hand, why shouldn't it speed it up?

And what the hell was the difference, either way?

He lifted the bottle again. He took less of it this time, but it was as much as he could drink before the gagging started. He fished out a cigarette and lit it, and waited for the exact state of numbness he wanted. He'd know it when it came.

The kitchen light glinted on the small oblong of aluminum. He separated the two halves and dropped the cyanide into the bottom

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of a glass and filled the glass a quarter of the way with whiskey. He stirred the whiskey with a spoon handle, and then pushed the glass away from him.

Not yet.

He'd know when the time came.

Chapter Twenty-one

MARCIA WEBSTER had worked late at the record shop, and by the time she let herself into her apartment, it was almost eight o'clock. She was not tired, but she was nervous from the cumulative effect of worrying about Jeff for days on end. At bottom, she was certain, the trouble lay with her. She had denied Jeff her body far too long, and this had either driven him to someone else, or was driving him there now. But it wasn't too late, she told herself. Not by a darn sight.

She showered quickly and wrapped herself in the robe Jeff had given her. She wasn't sleepy, nor particularly hungry; but with Jeff out of town, maybe a light supper and an early date with the pillow was not a bad idea.

Her phone rang.

"Miss Webster?"

"Yes."

"This is Miss Shaw. You asked me to let you know when Mr. Stoner came in. He just came through the foyer, Miss Webster."

Marcia said thanks, and hung up. She had felt a little guilty when she had asked the switchboard operator at Jeff's apartment house to let her know when he returned. It had been a whim, at the time, but the operator had accepted Marcia's heavy tip willingly enough, and so casually as to suggest that such requests were an every-night occurrence.

The whim, Marcia knew now, had been born of jealousy. She'd wanted to check on Jeff, and the knowledge that she'd gone to that length had caused her more than a little self-reproach. Still—it had been done, and she was now glad of it. A plan had been forming in her mind all day, and, now that Jeff was back, she could go through with it.

She walked quickly into her bedroom and opened the chest in which she kept the things she had been building into a trousseau. She knew exactly what she was going to wear. There was a wisp of

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black silk panties, and a narrow strip of diaphanous black silk that loosely could be termed a brassiere. They were ridiculous, and impractical, and therefore precisely what she wanted.

She took them from the chest and put them on the bed. She was extremely conscious of her body as she passed the vanity, and she paused to study herself a moment. No matter who Jeff's other girl was, Marcia reflected, a trifle grimly, she was going to make Jeff forget her. There was such a thing as fighting fire with fire. She smiled at the reflection of the equipment with which she was going to win Jeff back. She was not only going to put out the other fire, she was going to start one of her own that would keep Jeff's mind where it belonged from here on in.

The plain truth is, she thought, that I want him as much as he wants me. Maybe more. After all, I've never had anyone else.

She wriggled into the panties and fastened the thin strip of silk around her high breasts. They gave her the delicious feeling of being even more naked than she'd been without them.

She started to put on her garter belt, then remembered that Jeff had an aversion to them, and dropped it back in the dresser drawer. It was odd, the way men liked some of the things women wore, and greatly disliked others. Jeff's personal peeve had been garter belts. He'd even threatened, once they were married, to throw every one he found out the window. She smiled and opened another drawer and took out a pair of round garters and her sheerest pair of nylons.

She smoothed the stockings high up on her thighs and made certain the garters were daintily even, and then she slipped on her French pumps with the four-inch heels and walked to the closet. She studied the row of dresses a full minute before she decided on one. It was a tight-waisted, pale yellow number that Jeff had said he liked—the only one, in fact, about which she could remember him commenting at all.

She spent another two minutes fixing her hair, and she was ready. As she stepped out into the corridor she pondered over whether she shouldn't have put on a slip. But no . . . that would spoil things somehow. She's just have to be careful about getting between anyone and bright lights until she reached Jeff's apartment.

Though she knew what she wanted to do, and exactly how she meant to go about it, still, when Marcia stood before Jeff's door, she found herself trembling. She had been so sure of herself—and she was still sure that what she wanted to do was the answer to their troubles—but suddenly she was frightened by her own brazenness. What if Jeff misunderstood?

She wet her lips. Her heart was beating very fast. Too fast.

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Maybe she was being a little fool. Maybe going from one extreme to the other like this was the worst possible move she could make.

But there was another factor now: her desire for Jeff. It had been strong while she dressed; it had mounted steadily in the cab on the way over here; and now, at Jeff's door, the need for him was so strong that it was almost a physical pain.

She knocked on the door.

No answer.

She knocked again. When there was still no answer, nor any sound of movement inside the apartment, she reached down and twisted the doorknob. To her surprise, the door swung inward. She stepped inside the apartment, closed the door behind her, and locked it.

"Jeff!" she called. "Are you home?"

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back in the kitchen, and in a moment Jeff lurched through the kitchen door. He looked at her, and stopped quite still. "Marcia!"

So he was a little drunk . . . Well, she didn't care. What difference did that make? Maybe if she'd done something like this before, Jeff wouldn't have been so troubled that he had to get drunk. Besides, he wasn't so very drunk. She could tell.

He took an uncertain step toward her. "How'd you know I was here?"

She smiled at him. "That isn't fair." She sat down on the sofa and crossed her legs. "You might offer me a drink." How strange Jeff looked! How haggard and wan and, somehow, defeated. He was a little drunker than she'd thought at first. She had an idea, though, that she'd be able to take his mind off whiskey. After tonight, Jeff was going to find himself fully occupied with just one thing: herself. The idea pleased her. She was sure of herself again, sure that she could go through with this.

Jeff came into the living room and stood staring down at her. "You shouldn't have come."

"Why not?" He'd lost weight; a lot of it. And the skin beneath the dark hair was unhealthy, grayish-looking. Poor Jeff.

Jeff rubbed his hand down across his face slowly, as if very tired. "I'm dead for sleep," he said tonelessly. "I was going to turn in."

Disappointment seeped into Marcia. But only for a moment. Sleep was something else she could make Jeff forget. At least for a few hours. And, after that, things between them would be the way they should have been all along. She smiled at him warmly.

"All right, darling. I'll go—but first I'd like to have a drink. And not too strong."

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Jeff's throat worked, as if he wanted to say something, but his lips were grim. He looked at her a moment more, then shrugged and walked back toward the kitchen.

And now the realization came to Marcia that she was going to have to go even further than she'd planned. She had frustrated Jeff's advances so often that she was certain he would not attempt another. Certainly not tonight, feeling as he did.

It was up to her, she knew, to take the initiative. The thought troubled her. How brazen could a girl get? But she knew how brazen, and she knew she had no choice. She had to do it. And she had to hurry.

She stood up and quickly slipped the pale yellow dress over her head and smoothed it out on the arm of the sofa. She found herself trembling with anticipation.

She poised on her high heels and stood waiting, trying to still the excited tremors that flowed through her. Her fingers strayed up to the elastic at the top of her panties. Should she take those off?

No. The way she was would be just right. Why didn't Jeff hurry! If he didn't come out in another ten seconds, she'd go into the kitchen after him. She'd waited so long for this . . . so long . . . and now every second of delay was torment. Why didn't Jeff hurry?

Chapter Twenty-two

JEFF CLOSED the kitchen door behind him and slumped down at the table. It was hell, Marcia being here. It was hell—but it didn't change what he was going to do. God, she was beautiful. Another minute out there with her and he would have crumbled right down at her feet.

And that couldn't be. Time was running out. Either he went through with it now, or the cops would be here. The cops, and jail, and then the asylum ward for maniacs. He couldn't let that happen. Even if it meant hurting Marcia more than anything else would ever hurt her again, he had to kill himself—here, and now.

He was ready—this instant—but that didn't mean he would be after he'd thought of some way to get rid of Marcia. There was no quick way to get her out of the apartment, no way that wouldn't require explanation on top of explanation. He had the courage to take the cyanide now, but how would he feel two minutes from now? Ten minutes? His courage could falter in seconds. . . .

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He reached for the poisoned whiskey and lifted the glass to his lips. No use thinking about it; he had to do it.

Now.

He swallowed the cyanide and set the glass back down very slowly. That poor kid out there . . .

And suddenly he knew he had to see her one last time. He had to hear her voice. He had to tell her why he'd done this to himself . . . and to her. He pulled himself erect and lurched toward the door. Maybe there'd be time. There had to be time.

The sight of her was like a blow. He grabbed the doorjam for support, his eyes bulging. It couldn't be! He must be crazy in every way a man could be crazy! He closed his eyes tight, and held them shut for several seconds. But, when he opened them again, she was still standing there, still smiling at him in a way she had never smiled at him before. And, yes, she was naked, except for a wisp of a bra, tiny black panties and stockings rolled high up on her thighs.

She held her hands up toward him and whispered, "Jeff." He stared at the exquisite legs, the trembling pink and white body, and then he put his hands to his face and ground his knuckles hard against his eyes. The whiskey and poison were making him see something that wasn't there. He *was* completely crazy: that wasn't Marcia out there. *It was Leda Thomas!* He'd thought it was Marcia, because he *wanted* to see her—and for a moment his brain had tricked him into thinking it *was* her.

He opened his eyes again. You couldn't kill a girl with your eyes shut. You had to see what you were doing, so you could do it right. And this time was the last chance you'd ever get: you had to make it stick.

He moved toward her. That hair! Just like it had always been. Long and thick and red. Auburn, she called it. Auburn, hell! It was red. Plain dark red. He almost lost his balance, but he caught the back of a chair and lurched toward her again.

Leda was smiling a little uncertainly now, he noticed. Maybe she'd guessed what was going to happen to her. And her eyes were growing wide. Sure; she knew, and it scared the hell out of her. She was even trying to draw back from him. She was going to scream.

Inside of him, deep in the pit of his stomach, something began to tighten. It was as if a huge fist were clenching in there.

The poison. He had to hurry.

He saw Leda's red lips open wide. It was like no other scream he had ever heard. It set his teeth on edge. Other fists were clinching inside him now, around his heart and in his lungs. Nausea welled

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in his throat and a blinding burst of pain exploded in his brain. *Hurry!*

He dove forward just as Leda began to claw at the lock on the door. He pulled her away from it and threw her to the floor. There! Her throat was in his hands now. How strong she was. . . . Almost too strong. He had to squeeze harder. She had to die before the poison. . . .

He felt the strength draining from him. He'd waited too long! Maybe he could break her neck, the way he had that high-school girl's there on the bank of the stream. He slipped one hand behind Leda's head and grasped the shoulder-length hair. He could sure as hell break her neck.

He jerked the hair as hard as he could, but there was no sound of Leda's neck breaking.

There were people outside in the corridor, he realized. They were shouting something. Hell, they were shouting at him. They must have heard Leda scream. They were trying to get in. Somebody was throwing his weight against the door. The damn door wouldn't take much of that. He had to hurry.

Leda's elbow came up and drove into his throat. And then, somehow, she had slithered away from him and was on her feet. He got his hands and knees beneath him. She wasn't running. Something had happened to her. She just stood there. It was shock, he knew. Leda was paralyzed with terror. So paralyzed she couldn't move. Even to save her life.

Wood splintered and a man in an undershirt burst through the broken door. Other men followed him. Did they think they could keep him from killing Leda? And there were women out in the corridor. He could hear them yelling out there.

Heavy hands caught at his arms, pinning him there on his knees. Angry voices roared in his ears. Did they think they could stop him? He'd get his strength back in a moment, and then, he'd show them!

He glared at Leda. He couldn't see her so well now, what with that crazy red mist swirling around her. But he'd see her well enough, once he got his strength back. Hell, he could break any one of these men in half. Did they think he was afraid?

There was another woman in the room now, he saw. She was trying to help Leda, too. A huge, fat woman with thick eyeglasses.

Inside him, something seemed to rip wide open. He gasped with the pain. Something was tearing him . . . scalding him. He tasted the salt of his own blood where he had bitten through his lip.

The woman in the thick eyeglasses was wrapping something

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around Leda's body. A big, red spread of some kind. Did they think he cared whether Leda was naked or not?

That spread. Red, like Leda's hair. He stared at the spread as it grew larger and larger, so large that it seemed to fill the room. The blood-red spread was near his face now, almost touching him. He yelled and cringed back from it.

And then it was over his face and smothering him. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it against his flesh. Cold and damp and choking him.

There was no longer any pain in him. He was conscious only of the smothering dampness that was blinding him, killing him.

Leda, he thought. She's killing me. He felt himself crumpling, and then he felt the harsh fiber of the carpet against his cheek.

And soon he felt nothing at all.

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Epilogue

IT WAS raining. There had been but few people at Jeff Stoner's funeral, and most of those had left the graveside as soon as the casket had been lowered.

George Bishop held the umbrella so that it kept the slanting rain off Trudy's veiled hat. For a moment, he watched the men filling in the grave, and then his eyes moved slowly over to the place where Marcia Webster stood alone. He had brought her here, but she had seemed to want to be by herself, to stand apart from the others.

Trudy saw the direction of his glance, and looked the same way. "She hasn't cried once," she said.

"No," George said.

"I thought she loved him."

"She did," George said. "But there are things beyond tears, Trudy. I hope you never have to find that out."

Trudy's fingers closed more tightly on his arm.

"George . . ."

"Yes?"

"You've got an open field with her now, haven't you?"

George watched Marcia turn and slowly walk away, her shoulders bent beneath her raincoat. He said nothing.

Trudy made a soft sound in her throat. "I'm sorry, George. I didn't mean that. It's just that she's so beautiful."

"Yes," George said. "She's very beautiful, Trudy."

Trudy was silent a moment. Then, "I'll never understand it, George. What made Jeff do the things he did?"

George changed the umbrella to his other hand, put his arm around Trudy's waist and turned her in the direction of his car.

"It was a girl," he said. "A beautiful red-headed girl who did something terrible to him many years ago. He never got over it."

She glanced up at him. "A girl?"

He nodded. "The things she did to him built a kind of horrible little room in his mind. There was a lock on the door, with a special kind of combination. When certain things happened, the door opened."

Trudy shuddered. "I don't understand it, but it's awful. George . . . was Jeff Stoner really insane?"

George glanced back over his shoulder. Off there in the distance Marcia Webster's small figure was almost out of sight, blurred by the gray sweep of the rain.

"Yes, Trudy," he said.

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A MAN WITH A CRAVING HE COULD NEITHER ACCEPT OR DESTROY!

JEFF STONER was a cop who kept the law during the day. But the night drove him into whiskey-drenched rooms and the arms of a redhead—any redhead.

He couldn't resist the feel of it in his hands. The silky fire-red hair that inflamed his tough body and tore at his guts.

MARIA WEBSTER, his beautiful fiancee watched and waited for their wedding when they would consumate their love. But as Jeff's obsession grew more feverish day by day she became desperate. Would she be too late if she went to his apartment one night?

Complete and Unabridged

A LANCER BOOK

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